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VIOLET VYVIAN, M.F.H.

VOL. II.

VIOLET VYVIAN
M. F. H.

BY

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AND

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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VIOLET VYVIAN, M.F.H.

CHAPTER I.

HARD HIT.

None can enter into Violet Vyvian's feelings, during the long-drawn hours of the miserable night she spent after Kate O'Brien had made her painful confession and gone away, except those who have passed through a somewhat similar ordeal of bitterness.

Violet's blood seemed turned to fever in her veins. She lay with her eyes staring wide in the darkness, still, quite still. And yet her soft couch might have been a plank-bed, or even a rack, for all the rest it gave her; and after a

while the girl's sides were aching with real, physical weariness, yet she did not stir.

Her eyeballs were dry and burning like hot cinders in her head. She had not even a tear in pity of her own great misery to cool them. At first poor Violet felt stunned, but presently her thoughts sprang up and did wild battle in her brain. She tried to reason, but in vain; she could only *feel.* And there was nothing now left to feel but sorrow and exceeding bitterness. Jack loved her; yes, she was still sure of that. But he, nevertheless, had been dishonourable, untrue; beguiling one woman's love treacherously, and then abandoning it even while he was already seeking that of another.

And Violet herself?—alas! she knew that she loved him just as much as ever, but she was ashamed of it. She shuddered and shrank into herself at the thought that, even so few hours ago, he might perhaps have said almost the same words to Kate which had afterwards sounded so sweet in her own gladly-listening ears.

'Oh, Jack, how could you?—how could you?' the stricken girl moaned in her heart. And

yet, no! He could not have been so bad as that.

So her thoughts strove with each other, and now she sought to find excuses for Jack, and again accused him bitterly of weakness and selfishness, if not of double-dealing and treachery; and thus the night wore on.

How strange it seems to all of us when, in a few brief minutes, our whole life is sometimes changed—it may be, ruined. To Violet, all the fair future she had imagined of a happy marriage, of mutual love, gladness, and helpfulness, worth more than the money she willingly renounced—and stretching on, please God, through a vista of years to come—was shattered. What remained? Well, her old life, it is true; but she knew that it would never be the same again.

'My love was wasted!' she said to herself, with that inward, scornful laughter which is bred of bitterness too intense for tears. Her idol was fallen from its shrine and was broken, that was all! Her trust in friends, in the honour and honesty of this man and woman whom she

had believed in, as her own soul, was gone too—that was more.

No use blaming Kate now; she had, at least, confessed her fault, so far as was possible, in time to spare Violet worse pain. No use blaming Jack either. He had not spared Violet, it is true, but a woman is always willing to excuse a sin that springs from love of herself. And poor Rufus!—trusting in Kate's affection so loyally—no use to think about him either. No use thinking at all about what was done, and that could not be undone.

And so the night wore on, while Violet lay upon her bed,

> 'Sick in heart, and sick in head,
> And with doubts discomforted.'

At last the long 'small hours' passed, and another day dawned. As soon as it began to be light, the mistress of Forde Manor rose and dressed herself in haste; then sat down to write a letter. She made many attempts that were presently torn up as useless, for it was difficult not to express more than she wished. 'It must be a short letter,' she said to herself; but that, as

is a well-known fact, takes sometimes a longer time to write than a long one. An hour had gone by before at last it was finished, thus :—

'I cannot meet you this morning, as I promised yesterday. It would be better if we never met again. Please do not ask me why; nor try to see me any more!

'Let it be sufficient that, since yesterday evening, I have, most unhappily for myself, learnt to see matters as they stand between us in a true light.

'V. V.'

Later on, when she knew the household was up and stirring, Violet went downstairs, and, taking her hat that always hung ready in the hall, went out to the stables. There was not much surprise felt among the men there at this early visit; for their young mistress was accustomed to see after her horses pretty keenly herself, as became an M.F.H. But, at any hour, it must be said in praise of her rule and the loyal attachment of the old servants, most

of whom had known her from a child, Violet's bright face was a welcome sight; and the men cleaned buckles and bits more eagerly while on the look-out for a pleasant word; and the horses whinnied in their boxes when they heard her step, expecting a pat on the neck and some little dainty of carrots or sugar, while there would certainly be little amiss in the well-ordered daily routine to call for inquiry, much less blame, on the part of the mistress.

Violet called up one of the younger stable-boys, a bright-eyed lad, the gamekeeper's son, and desired him to carry her letter down to Littleforde at once. She hoped that Ramsay might thus get it before he should leave the house, with the intention of meeting herself. Then, as the lad went off, little guessing what a terribly weighty message of good or evil import to two persons, and one of them his own rich and envied young lady, was in that little note, Violet exerted herself to go into the stalls and see how the grey, Moorcock, looked after his late race, and have a little stable-chat with her stud-groom as cheerily as if the last

night's blackness of misery had been a dream, and that all things were as they had been even yesterday morning. All things, she knew, ought to seem to go on just the same in the little world of Forde, of which she was the central figure. She must pull herself together, and wear a brave face, without showing that she felt utterly crushed, hopeless, miserable.

Meanwhile, the stable-boy had not yet gone through the park and reached the little door in the wall, that had been made for Mrs. Beaumont's own particular use, when he met 'the captain,' apparently taking an early stroll in the beechwood, to get an appetite for breakfast. Jack had not slept much more than Violet last night, but it was from excess of happiness. In the highest possible spirits, he had risen far earlier than was necessary, and come out this morning to catch the first glimpse of Violet's dress fluttering through the trees; not to lose a second of the brief time left in which to see her bright face, and lure once more from her own lips the sweet, shy assurances, given in faltering words he found so deeply eloquent,

that she loved him. It seemed too amazing a joy! He could not realize it, yet it was absolutely, actually true.

It was so good of her to consent to come down this morning to the wood, which was his only chance of a hasty good-bye before an early breakfast and hurrying off to catch the morning train. Jack just then wished the service anywhere! in his heart; for, but for its exigencies and his brief leave, he could so easily have stayed later, and settled all that was left unsaid between himself and Violet. He could still beg her this morning, however, to write to him; and ask also when he might be allowed to come and see her again; and when—chief question of all!—he might hope to claim her proudly as his very own, his wife.

Meantime, Jack also wished—though this was a lesser matter—to ask if he had her leave to tell Margaret Beaumont of his great happiness. Dear, good Madge, she would be so glad! She had been Jack's chosen friend and confidante from his boyhood, and he knew she

gave Violet little less than an elder sister's love and admiration.

Margaret would be a good deal surprised, although Jack surmised she guessed something of his late private feelings. And she would sigh a little in secret, no doubt, over the loss of Forde Manor and the broad lands that went with it, at which the lovers laughed so lightly in their happiness; yet still she would, in her heart, be glad—very glad.

'A letter for you, sir. Miss Vyvian sent me with it;' and the stable-boy, whom Jack Ramsay, in preoccupation of mind, had hardly noticed, recognising who he was, and vaguely supposing him on his way to Hagget's cottage, approached touching his hat respectfully. Then the lad volunteered on his own account, 'Sorry you'm goin' away this mornin', capt'n. I 'opes as 'ow your 'oss 'Arlequin be none the wuss for his race the day afore yesterday? 'Twas the finest sight iver I seed when you comed in fust with the bridle all slipped hoff and dangling about 'is legs, it was.'

'All right, thank you, George. We're both

of us all right after it,' returned Ramsay, with the pleasant voice that made him as much liked and respected by those below him in station as he was a favourite among his equals. Then he gave the lad half-a-crown and turned away into another side-path, feeling a disappointed conviction that Violet was not able to come this morning, after all—that was it; perhaps she had a head-ache, poor darling, or had slept badly like himself, and he was glad she had not disturbed herself early on his account—how quickly thoughts flash!—but still, still he held between his fingers her first precious love-letter.

Ramsay gave a quick glance round. He was alone among the trees, where tender signs of April growth were shooting softly; the birds were twittering, and a pleasant breeze blowing. In and out of the thick undergrowth on either side of the grassy path some pheasants were stealing, and then running across with speedy legs, while apparently trying to preserve an air of graceful dignity and composure as to their bodies.

Jack was alone, so broke open his letter. He read it once, bewildered; a second time, and put his hand over his eyes.

All right! was what he had laughingly said of himself to the young groom so few seconds ago. Even at that moment the memory of his words dully came back to him.

'*All wrong!*—my God, what does it mean?' he murmured, half-audibly, to himself, in his agony. 'She loves me; surely she cannot intend to throw me over.'

For awhile Ramsay stood there, supporting himself against the silvery trunk of a tall beech-tree, motionless, hardly capable of thinking in his stunned state. Then he raised the letter again that was still between his listless, down-dropped fingers, slowly unclasped the other hand from his bewildered forehead, and stared hard once more at the dainty note-paper, with its lilac and silver monogram of a violet in one corner. The pretty handwriting he had admired before now, might seem to have faltered a little here and there. But the words were

clear to see in black and white, '*It would be better that we never met again.*'

Gradually the conviction came upon Jack that Violet did mean this, indeed—that all was over between them. He seemed numbed as the truth dawned in his mind. His heart, that was so hot a few seconds ago with the wholesome warmth of love and happiness, was now frozen on a sudden as with the touch of an icy coldness. And then——

Well, then, we may stand aloof a little while, and leave him in his bitterness of soul. As it is in the nature of all animals to creep away and hide themselves in some lair from observation when they are wounded or in pain, so man, the noblest of animals, shuns instinctively being pried upon by any eyes in his hour of deepest suffering.

But, as the still figure remained there under the beech-tree, all manner of happy noises broke out little by little, and ever louder in the wood around. Nesting-birds were twittering to their mates, and flying in and out of the coppice in haste, while here and there a cock-

thrush, which had finished his yearly house-building, sat on a twig near his round home, and trolled out a full-throated song, or a golden-billed blackbird whistled a ditty of glee; both rejoicing in the happy future of sunshiny days, and callow, gaping nestlings, and plenty of food to be picked up on dewy mornings and warm evenings after pleasant showers, when fat worms rise to the surface of the green, refreshed earth, and grubs are plentiful.

A deer or two belled down in the open glades of the park; cock pheasants crowed; rabbits frisked and fed; and all manner of lesser wild creatures, of small beasts, and birds, and insects, took heart and gamboled and enjoyed themselves without fear of the man hidden some yards away behind the great tree. They were all happy; all enjoying themselves, though he so near them was in pain that moment. That is the way of the world; and right it is, surely.

At last Ramsay raised his head dully; his eyes stared a moment upwards through the spreading branches where green leaf-buds hung

like a dotted shower that would soon burst into broader foliage. But he could not yet take any comfort in seeing the softly-blue sky far overhead. It would bring its lesson of consolation in time, as to lie in the bosom of nature our great nurse does, in some wooded valley, where a hidden stream sings through the fern, or on a lone hill-brow, or by the seashore,—but not yet. Then Jack's eyes, in descending, caught sight of some letters carved in the bark, apparently years ago. Only two initials, no doubt those of some rustic lover and his lass, with a heart rudely cut joining them. Since long before the days when Orlando wandered in the green forest of Arden, the beech-tree's bark has been the book sacred to record fond lovers' troth. Jack Ramsay smiled bitterly to himself. 'Was she faithful to her plighted word, I wonder?' he said, under his breath. Then suddenly he took out his pocket-knife, and began cutting deeply in the bark, with such a will that the letters were not likely to be obliterated for many and many a year, J.—V.,

with a bar between. Then followed the date of day and year.

It was an idle whim at such a moment; but as Jack dug his knife-point with savage energy into the tree, and that the fresh wounds he hewed stared at him in those familiar characters, he seemed to gain relief for the time. No one was ever likely to turn aside from the path into the wood just there, or even notice the letters should the beaters brush past on a November day, while pheasants whirred over the open grass-ride and shots were being fired from the favourite corners where the sportsmen would be stationed. But he—however far away, if even thousands of miles of sea, and of foreign countries intervened—would always be glad to know, in his heart, that there in the leafy recesses of an English wood, *her* property, he had left the mark, known to himself only, of a day never to be forgotten, of a love he at least would ever hold fast whilst those letters lasted. And they were not likely to be lost in the slow growth of the tree, till he was either long dead

or had lived far beyond man's allotted span of years.

The clanging of a bell heard through the trees, and coming across the park-wall and road outside, startled Ramsay. He had been standing stupidly still, looking at his handiwork, in truth not knowing what he was about. Hurrying back to Littleforde through the door in the wall, of which he had some time ago appropriated Margaret's pass-key, Jack pushed back the white swing-gate. He found Miss Dolly on the trim little lawn, near the beehives, ringing the dinner-bell, that seemed half as big as herself, in erratic fashion. Sometimes, by grasping it hard with both chubby hands and swinging it a few inches from the ground a good deal of jangling noise was produced. But just now, anxious to emulate the feats of the parlour-maid, she swung it high in her fat arms, when with one dismal toll or two the tongue dropped on the side, and Dolly hugged her silent bell in astonished indignation.

'Me doing sexton. Come to your bleakfess,' she announced, doubtfully relinquishing her big

toy in favour of prospective hot buttered cake and marmalade.

'You are indeed, Dolly,' said Jack, thinking, poor fellow, that the child was unconsciously ringing the knell of his newly-dead happiness. The little girl made a trotting rush across the grass to grasp his hand.

'You were not at *payers* with us this morning. You are a naughty boy, Uncle Jack,' she observed, with a look of grave rebuke, but a sound of delight in her accents at catching her frequent Mentor and favourite playfellow tripping.

'Very likely, Dolly. I'm afraid I'm not much good, nor worth anyone thinking well of me,' was the wearily dismal answer. Then Ramsay stood still and collected himself, trying to show no signs of the blank misery that seemed ready to overwhelm him when he entered a minute later to greet his cousin, smiling prettily as ever behind her tea-urn, and proceeded to swallow a few mouthfuls of toast, that seemed likely to choke him, with an air of great haste. Nevertheless, his looks were so pale they did not

escape the affectionate scrutiny of the beautiful brown eyes that watched him.

'What is the matter with you, Jack, this morning?' Mrs. Beaumont presently asked. 'You are looking quite out of sorts, and last night you were in the highest of spirits. Have you had any bad news.'

'How should I have any bad news, my dear old Madge,' (with a forced laugh), 'why, your post has not come in yet.'

'You did not chance to see Violet Vyvian, this morning, in your ramble, did you?' asked Margaret, after a long pause, with laboriously feigned indifference.

'Miss Vyvian! no, I have not seen her since yesterday,' returned Jack, truthfully, in the dogged sort of tone with which men seek to repel feminine attempts to search too closely into matters that concern them not.

'Good-bye, Dolly, how soon will you forget me?' he said presently, taking up the little maid in his arms.

'Never—never. Not till I am quite big,' answered Dolly, covering his face with kisses.

'That's it——' said Jack, with a little groan, putting her down; then he wrung Margaret Beaumont's hand and jumped into the waiting dog-cart.

CHAPTER II.

'ONLY LET ME HOPE.'

A WEEK—a fortnight—three weeks—and not a line of further explanation from Violet. Jack tried to be patiently trusting, thinking every day would bring him another letter from her. What had he done? Why did she not write? His first impulse was to ask for an explanation, for he could not understand this sudden transition from almost avowed love on her part, and a love he felt sure he possessed, to those few cold lines of dismissal. Was it that, at the last moment, she found the sacrifice of lands and wealth too much to make for his sake? Yet she had told him she would gladly give up all for him.

It was not as if he was a needy man. He was fairly well-off, with the prospect of coming into a nice little property at the death of an old uncle, whose heir he was, and this—added to the five hundred pounds a-year Violet would in any case be entitled to under her father's will—would be quite sufficient for them to live comfortably on. Of course they could not afford such luxury as she now enjoyed, but still their income would be enough to get along on very well. Then those words, 'Please do not ask me why; and do not try to see me,' continually tormented him. It was unfair on her part, and bitter thoughts rose to his mind about the fickleness of women in general, and Violet in particular; yet these in turn melted away into a tenderer one for this woman that he now loved with all his heart and soul. He was too loyal to her, to think that she could have acted thus without some powerful reason, and that she did not wish him to inquire into her motives was evident; so what could he do but respect her wishes on this point? No, he must just grin and bear it, and he did his best to do

so in a brave and manly way. He was no half-hearted sentimentalist, to sigh and fret for what he saw he could not obtain—and therefore threw himself with redoubled ardour into all the duties of his profession, and, keen soldier as he always had been, he became keener still. Try as he would, however, he could not always control his feelings, and his friends and brother-officers noticed by degrees that the Jack Ramsay of former days, who had always been foremost in any fun or excitement that was going on, who had been the life of the Horse Artillery quartered at Aldershot, had now given up polo, cricket, racquets, and was not always running up to town to the theatres, etc., but instead, had suddenly developed an extraordinary predilection for long, solitary, country walks.

'O! my dear fellow,' he would answer, when questioned on this novel taste, 'you must remember that soldiering is a serious business now-a-days. I'm studying the topographical features of the surrounding country—going in for surveying—and trying to rub up what I learnt at Woolwich years ago. Besides, you

know, there is to be a big sham-fight here soon, with no end of big-wigs down to see it; and I want the old battery to cut a dash—so am picking out and noting any nasty spots we may have to get over.' And with this reply his inquirers had to be content, though young Shrapnel, one of the subalterns in his battery, wisely remarked one day to a friend, 'I'll bet a pony there is a petticoat at the bottom of all this, though old Jack is too reserved a man to acknowledge it, even if one asked him.'

Still, strive as he would, life was becoming very weary to poor Jack. Day after day he turned over his letters impatiently, and yet no line from Violet appeared among them. He had heard once or twice from Margaret Beaumont, but she made no allusion to the Forde Manor party, though in his replies to her he had always added a postscript of, 'Kind regards to all at Forde.' He was getting sick at heart, sick and weary, waiting for the word that never came.

At last one day he resolved on the course

he should pursue. It was a pouring wet afternoon, and the outlook was gloomy in the extreme; in fact, a day which no sane man would have selected for a country ramble, however much he might be addicted to admiring the beauties of nature. Jack had skimmed through all the papers in the ante-room, and was standing staring out of the window, watching the rain as it steadily descended, forming great, inky-looking puddles on the peaty soil of the road, and thinking, thinking what was now a daily, nay, hourly, thought with him: When should he hear from Violet? At last he roused himself, and went off to his barrack-room, determined to divert his mind by some occupation—sketching, some stiff reading, or anything that might take him away from himself.

His room was, though tiny, a very cheerful one, and bespoke the tastes of its occupant. The little den that formed his sitting-room contained the conventional articles of an officer's room—a couple of easy-chairs, a writing-table, a whip-and-stick rack, etc., a few good pictures of sporting subjects and a rare etching or two

adorned the walls, on which were hung several foxes' masks and brushes. A few little knick-nacks of china and some flowers were scattered about the room, whilst on a bear-skin before the cheerful fire lay a black retriever, Jack's faithful and constant companion. A small book-shelf, containing volumes on military tactics and gunnery, some few sporting works, with history ancient and modern, and biographies of eminent men, showed that his taste in literature had a tendency to the instructive. Altogether, a very snug and cosy little room. Lighting a pipe, Jack threw himself into an easy-chair, and, after a few vigorous puffs, allowed his thoughts to wander away into the old vein once more. Violet could not really care for him; she preferred her money and her lands to him. Ah! there it was. He was thinking too much of his own misery. 'Why should not she enjoy herself, poor darling?' he said to himself, as his thoughts again strayed into a more tender strain.

Long time did Jack sit in his arm-chair thinking, until at times he felt as if his brain

must burst. He then tried drawing, to divert his thoughts; but somehow there seemed to be more unison between pencil and mind than between pencil and inclination, for his sketches invariably took the form of a face and figure marvellously like Violet. Then he dipped into a volume of *Froissart's Chronicles*, but the quaint old language seemed monotonous in his present frame of mind, and had lost all the charm it had once possessed for him. So this was flung aside.

At last he took up a little morocco-leather case on his table, and, holding it in both hands, gazed eagerly and lovingly at it. It was a small portrait of a handsome, winning-looking old lady—his mother, who had died some four or five years ago. Of all beings on earth, Jack had loved and reverenced his mother the most deeply; and from the time when he was a tiny, toddling bairn, and had run to tell his mother all his boyish troubles, knowing that at her gentle hands he would be sure to meet with tender loving sympathy and consolation, to the days when, later on in the first flush of his

manhood, he had got into more serious scrapes, he had never had any secrets from her. She had always been to him the true friend, the trusted counsellor, and the loving woman; and, when she died, he felt as if half that made life happy and enjoyable was gone.

Often and often the thought of 'what would mother say?' or 'what would mother think?' had kept him not only from perhaps committing some imprudent act, but more, yea, even from sin; for Jack was as other men, and to him the charms of the opposite sex had great attractions. Not that he was immaculate—who is? but the thought of his loved mother, and how it would grieve her if she knew her only son had done aught unworthy of a man and a gentleman, gave him a higher feeling of reverence and chivalrous respect for all women, because she had been a woman and a *good* woman, that highest creation of the Almighty's, and the greatest blessing He has given to man to share and fight the great battle of life with him. Often when Jack was in trouble about anything, he would gaze long and earnestly at that

little miniature of the dead mother that he had idolized, and strive by so doing to gain inspiration and assistance.

'O! mother, mother, if you were only alive, you could help me; you would tell your boy what to do,' he said, as he kissed the little picture reverently. Then, after a while, things became clearer to him; he thought out his way on the path of generous chivalry. He would not worry Violet, but make her one appeal, and then, if that produced no result,—well, he would exchange to a battery in India. There was always something going on in that great nursery for soldiers, some little war or excitement of some sort that might take his thoughts away from himself. Nay, he might perhaps have the chance of distinguishing himself, and by so doing win back Violet's esteem.

He knew that if he stayed at home he could not much longer fight against the passionate longing to see his love, to speak to her, to ask from her own lips the why and the wherefore of that letter which had come like a black cloud between him and what promised to be the sun-

shine of his life, and which even now he had a sort of superstitious feeling would not be dissipated for many a long day. No, it was much better he should go away; but he would write just this once, and, if he got no answer, then—Ah! God help him, for he felt life would indeed be drear.

Thus, therefore, he wrote:

'What have I done that you would not see me as you promised on the morning that I left Littleforde? I have tried to respect your wishes, and not ask for an explanation, but I cannot refrain any longer. Heaven knows I have given you *all* my love, Violet, and I thought I had yours. At least in common fairness tell me the cause of this sudden change in your feeling; tell me what I am accused of, and who my accuser is, that I may have an opportunity of clearing myself. I have given you all my heart—oh! my darling, my darling, do not crush it, and throw it away from you. If you care for lands and wealth more than for me, and cannot bring yourself to give them up for my poor sake, in honesty say so. Do not think I shall blame

you for it; and, though it will be a hard and bitter struggle, still let me always be your friend—a true friend, Violet, as you once promised you would be to me. A real friend is so hard to gain, and alas! often so difficult to keep; but I do believe even now that I have your friendship, if not your love. I will do anything you bid me, only *let me hope;* but when that dies out, life will indeed be hard for me. Still, if it be for your happiness, dearest, I will not murmur, but try to bear all like a man for your dear sake. Only please, please in pure mercy tell me why you have changed. God bless and keep you.—JACK.'

With a spirit of self-abnegation strong in his manly, honest heart, it had cost Jack Ramsay a great deal ere he could pen this appeal to Violet, but at last it was done, sealed, and posted.

Several weeks elapsed, however, and no reply came; and then, though he was no narrow-minded egotist influenced by jealousy or paltry feeling that is apt to conjure up offence, all his pride and feeling of self-respect rebelled,

and he made up his mind to exchange to India.

Yes, the more he thought of it, the more certain he was that he had arrived at a right decision. Out there in the far East all would be new to him; he would have opportunities of indulging in all the adventurous excitement that the pursuit of big game affords, such as the tamer life of Old England could never offer him—nay, perhaps in the great game of war. He *would* try to bear patiently the trouble and the cross laid upon him as his dear dead mother would wish him to do. Had she been alive he knew she would have been the first to urge on him the step he was about to take; and, hard and bitter though it would have been to her to part with her heart's darling, she would have said, 'Go, my boy, and God bless and guard you!' And so, after carefully going over all the pros and cons of the situation, the exchange was completed and he was shortly to sail for India; but when he announced this fact to his brother-officers one night at mess, loud were their lamentations, and many were the questions put as to why he had taken this step.

'What on earth are you going out to that beastly country for?' asked one.

'Look here, old man, if you are hard up, I'll fly a kite with you,' said another.

'You promised to ride Gimcrack for me at the races, and who on earth am I to get to do so now?' queried a third.

'For goodness sake leave petticoats alone, Jack, and stick to sport,' sagely observed young Shrapnel.

But to all these remarks, and kindly offers of assistance, Jack turned a deaf ear, and only answered smilingly,

'It is awfully kind of you all, but I'm not hard up; and you are quite right, Shrapnel, and it's just for that reason I am going to the glorious East. I want to have some pigsticking and some big game shooting before all my nerves go; but my mind is made up, the exchange is effected, and I shall soon be off. So there is no more to be said except to drink all your very good healths and pledge you all to our next merry meeting.'

No more than this could be got out of

Ramsay even by his greatest friends. Brenda he sent down to old Squire Bentley, asking him to take care of her and use her as a hack. Erebus, his two chargers, and a smart pony went up to Tattersall's. Only Harlequin was left at Aldershot in charge of young Shrapnel, till Jack should come back for the last time to wish his friends adieu and collect all his impedimenta; then he went up to town to buy his kit, rifles, &c., and make his final preparations for departure.

CHAPTER III.

KATE'S TEMPTATION.

MAY was meanwhile coming to its prime at Forde Manor. No shrewish, nipping May as too often makes us jeer at old Herrick and his fellow-poets, and their worship of the merry month. But one of those rare, early summer-times when the hawthorn-trees dotting the park seemed weighed down with their fragrant snowy loads; and laburnums made a yellow glory with their down-dropping golden-chains; and the lilacs nodded heavy-headed with their own sweetness.

The sunshine was so softly warm; the whole earth fresh, and fair, and green. And Violet

Vyvian, meantime, walked through her woods, and by the lake, or followed the windings of the brook that meandered through her farm and park, with a heavy heart and a sense of great desolation in her young life, as she rambled aimlessly on—alone.

Alone! That was how it would have to be through so many more springs and summers and winters, till she grew, if she lived, to be an old woman.

'*I cannot bear it!*' she would sometimes cry aloud in her heart, pausing in her lonely walk and staring with unseeing eyes at the glassy lake, where some moorhens and wild ducks were slipping through the sedges by the shore, and a heron flapping slowly away with broad greyish-blue wings. It seemed so hard, to be rich, young, pleasant enough to look upon—but so miserable! Then she knew it was mere rubbish to say she could not bear it, for that she *must*. What was more, she must bear it bravely, not creeping about half-sinking under her secret burden of bitterness, and bringing her own shadow into other folk's little spell of sun-

shine; which may be brief enough as life goes on, so let them rejoice while they have it. Violet, therefore, braced herself to go through all her duties with plodding perseverance, and neither the house nor the stables, the garden nor farm, and, to come to larger matters, the affairs of her property, nor the poor of the parish, found her wanting in carefulness and will. But it was all a daily, weekly effort—she had no heart in these things.

After all, it was harder on poor Violet than it might have been on some other women. Hers was no reserved melancholy nature, but one most open, clinging, and affectionate. Had she had any sister or brother whose daily companionship and affection she might still have relied on, even a cousin, a friend—'Why, then I should not feel so utterly a solitary speck in the world,' the girl self-argued, taking her own part once or so, by way of fairness, after scolding herself into some severe efforts at gaiety, for sake of the neighbours, at a country bazaar and some tennis-parties which left her unusually worn-out and depressed.

At first Violet had some yearnings to make a clean breast of the whole matter to her true friend, Margaret Beaumont. Then she hesitated; it would be dishonourable to Kate O'Brien. Next she decided to wait and see whether Jack himself had said any word to his cousin on the subject. Now, if a woman can manage to keep her tongue silent regarding any secret for forty-eight hours, the chances are that the longing to tell some one will pass over; and most likely she will bless her own discretion.

So it was with Violet. She went almost daily now to the little white house, where she was certain of a glad welcome; although the matter nearest her heart was never mentioned.

'I cannot make out what it has been between her and Jack,' mused Margaret to herself. 'Probably only a serious flirtation; and both have seen that, owing to that terrible will, nothing more could come of it. Least said soonest forgotten, in such affairs. Well, I'm afraid they have both been rather hard hit, for Violet is certainly pale, and has lost her spirits a little. But she is true stuff, and so is he; and

both will take their share of this world's trouble nobly. Such wills ought not to be allowed! The idea of anyone after death making the lives of other people miserable!'

These visits, and her occasional solitary rambles, were Violet's chief, indeed only hours of relief. But the latter walks were a pleasure much resembling pain. Hardly a spot in Forde Manor park, woods, and fields, but had some association with Jack; and, of course, like all true lovers, Violet sought those places where *he* had been, and conjured up the past scenes in her mind over and over again.

To enjoy these pleasures of melancholy, however, she tried to avoid the jealous scrutiny of Kate O'Brien's dark, gloomily-watchful eyes. The latter had been fitful and moody ever since, by her own doing, she had banished Jack Ramsay. She tried to control her temper towards her hostess, Violet; but too often the spark of a bitter look, or a sharp word would flash out, betraying the fire of unsatisfied longing and wrathfulness in the spoilt beauty's heart. And Violet tried to be kind always, and patient with

these little outbreaks, but secretly chafed, and was as miserable as Kate. Both women, knowing they loved the same man, naturally could not get on together.

'What a fool I am! I must not quarrel with my bread-and-butter,' Kate would reproach herself angrily. Then again she would add, in mingled remorse and self-excuse, 'After all, I have succeeded; she has *not* got him! I have done her harm enough, as far as love goes, so I might forgive her for coming unknowingly between me and the one man on earth I now care for. But there! I have strong feelings; while Violet seems only made of milk-and-water. Heavens! how could she have given him up so easily? I never would have done it.'

'Poor Kate!' Violet sighed to herself. 'I must try to bear with her for Rufus' sake. If I did send them away now, to leave me in peace in my own house, she has nowhere to go to, I know. After all, she has the worst of it. I have a clear conscience, and my home and fortune, and—I had his love last.'

So, to avoid all chance of meeting Kate

O'Brien during her out-of-doors reveries, Violet took to early rising, and had her quiet hour outside before breakfast, whilst Mrs. O'Brien was still heavily asleep after a troubled night, during which conscience had been a waking executioner to whom she seemed to be given over for torture until dawn.

One morning about seven, when the dew still lay in silvern freshness on the grass and bushes everywhere, Violet went through the park. A fancy possessed her this special morning to picture to herself as far as possible the scene on that other fateful one. when her lover got her note bidding him adieu for ever. A question to George Haggett, put with the most careless air, had elicited the reply she wanted.

'The captin wur standin' just by the cross-paths in the wood, so I had no need to go on to Littleforde; he turned down towards the big beeches afterwards, I think.'

Now Violet was on the familiar path to Littleforde leading through her own woods. How often Jack Ramsay had come that way, and she had watched his tall straight figure approaching

between the trees, the goodliest man she had ever seen. This was the spot, by the cross-paths! Here—he must have turned down towards the big beeches, at just this hour, on just such a fresh sweet morning, so little time ago. Moving aimlessly on, only impelled by the fancy that her feet were pressing the turf where Ramsay had passed, Violet strayed aside, and, by strange chance, paused to rest a minute under the largest of the beech-trees bordering the glade.

Raising her eyes after some musing, a sudden thrill shot through the girl's body, a hot rush of blood dyed her face. There on the tree-bark the letters J.—V. stared her in the face, and the date. In a glance she saw it all, and understood. The old letters above of some forgotten lovers, joined by a double heart; hers and his below, but with a bar cut between them. Violet trembled a little, then she sat down on the mossy ground and leaned her head against the swelling bole of the old tree.

How intensely she longed the beech could have told her lover's thoughts as he cut those

initials. A bar between them—yes, there truly was. But perhaps, nevertheless, her memory might still remain graven in his heart. Violet ought perhaps to have blamed Jack Ramsay in her own; but, to tell the truth, she did not do so.

'If one only knew all, one could surely enter into another's feelings, and so understand the temptation, and forgive everything,' she said to herself. Violet strongly felt that; '*tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner.*' She believed there had been wrong, from Kate's own avowal; words spoken at least that should never have been said; but she only pitied Kate, and him, too. How dare any of us sinning mortals judge each other? Violet Vyvian, at least, said to herself that, though she was not conscious of ever having done any action that she need be ashamed of hearing proclaimed in the market-place, it was from no special goodness in herself. Probably, as often as others, she might have walked heedlessly on the edge of a precipice without knowing it. Others had slipped downwards; she, by the grace of a

power higher than her own, still had her feet on sure ground. Some day, unless she took yet greater care, who should say but what she, too, might be brought as low, or lower? 'Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.' Thenceforth Violet's favourite lonely walk was round by the beech-tree ride. There seemed a link there, a last secret between herself and Jack.

Meanwhile, Kate O'Brien was idle, for she had no duties of property laid upon her, as she bitterly told herself, and she certainly never toiled at any self-imposed tasks. So she lay in a hammock all day in the garden, with half-closed eyelids, and a French novel between her lazy, listless fingers. Sometimes poor Rufus, feeling lonely, himself, now Ramsay was gone, would come cheerily to the big cedar-tree and say, seeking companionship from the beautiful being who hardly stirred her black eyelashes to notice his approach,

'Well, little woman, do you feel like having a stroll with me, eh? No, is it? Well, then, right you are; and we'll stay here and be happy

together. Can you make room for me, or shall I swing you?'

'O, Rufus, do go away. There is no room for you here; and you know I hate the smell of a pipe,' Kate would reply, with an irritability of tone there was no making any mistake about; it was so intense, though suppressed.

'It's newly come *to* you, then!' Rufus could not forbear the muttered retort. Without being jealous, he could not help remembering that, only a little time ago, when Jack Ramsay was with them, Kate's nerves were perfectly equal to staying in the billiard-room for any amount of time, in spite of the said pipe. He turned away now, remarking, with another attempt at good-humour, 'Well, as my company seems less in request than my absence here, I'll take myself down to Littleforde, and see what our pretty widow is after doing to-day.'

'Littleforde seems to have great attractions for you; you were down there yesterday and the day before and the day before that.'

'Well, if you don't want me here, I suppose I may as well go *somewhere!* What would you

like me to do? Speak the word. What pleases you, pleases me.'

'O, nothing, nothing! (only to be left in peace),' this murmured inaudibly, but made intelligible by the fretful frown on the broad, white brow, and a look of dark scorn, before the sleepy eyes covered themselves again with their lids.

Kate's eyes seemed to be holding lightnings in reserve those days. Rufus had not made two strides away, however, before she called after him,

'You won't have your Mrs. Beaumont to yourself. Violet is down there, too, as usual.'

'I don't mind if she is. Besides, I won't intrude upon their confidences if they are talking any. Dolly is a good enough companion for anybody.'

'So you keep telling me. Your taste seems so easily pleased that it is really hardly a high compliment to me. May I ask how you spend your time so usefully and agreeably—playing cat's-cradle?'

'No;' rather angrily. 'And if ye don't think

it's useful to make a little child happy, besides being agreeable to oneself, faith! I'm sorry for ye.'

'Don't get cross, Rufus. You are always so Irish when you are in a temper. Well, but what do you do? Now I come to think of it, you have been hours and hours down there this week.'

'What does it matter? It's seldom enough you do think about where I am for hours and hours.'

'But I *want to know!*'

Kate drew herself up a little, holding the hammock-cords with one arm raised above her head. Her dark head looked so beautiful, her pose was so languidly graceful, that Rufus, although pretty well used to admiring his wife, felt stirred to please her by obedience, flattered that she cared about his small actions.

'Well, then,' he confessed, yet with some reluctance, 'I have been carpentering a bit. I'm making Dolly a little cart.'

'A go-cart!' Mrs. O'Brien broke into a jeering laugh. 'What a fine idea! Well, I hope

you are going to turn nursery-maid afterwards, and push your infant charge about all day. Really, I must congratulate Mrs. Beaumont on her new domestic; what wages does she offer, may I ask?'

Thereupon she sank back into her hammock, and turned on her other side. Rufus turned away too, and went off with long-legged, angry strides, his face flushing a little.

'I wish I hadn't told her, but it's always the same thing. Much she cares!' he thought in his heart; then went with all the more determination down to the friendly white house outside the park-wall, where almost every day, after similar, or often far more trying and stormy altercations with Kate, he found a pleasant relief in the welcome and kindly words of a good and pleasant woman, and in the devoted affection and silvery laughter of a little child. Rufus was very fond of children, and it gladdened him to have Dolly clamber on his knees, then hug him boisterously round the neck and cover his face with kisses; to watch for him when he came, and look sad after him when he

left. These were the wages about which Kate had sneered—well, they were worth something.

Kate looked after his receding figure from between her half-closed eyelids.

'They all go down there,' she thought, with a sort of resentment against Margaret beginning to smoulder in her heart.

She was not jealous, exactly; indeed, hitherto she had been rather pleased when anyone took Rufus off her hands, as she phrased it in her heart. But now she felt vaguely as if he had no right to console himself—for Kate knew she herself often worried him—whilst she was unhappy.

'I must stop his going to Littleforde,' she added, darkly, to herself. Then, with a sudden touch of remorse: 'Poor fellow, I am hard towards him! I must—I will try to treat him more kindly.'

And she did so try that evening—at least, for a little while. But next day the evil leaven of bitterness working in her mind would seem to poor Kate paramount to all wifely consideration. She *must* give it vent in fretfulness, or

sarcastic remarks on her happy-go-lucky spouse's shortcomings as to good looks, manners, or carelessly-adjusted necktie, if she did not drive him more wild by discontented laments on the poverty that kept her from going to London this May or June for a few short weeks, even a fortnight, of the season. It was cruel of Fate! she felt, and said, when everyone else was sure to be there. O'Brien could often have torn his hair after these taunts; then he would reason with himself:

'Poor girl! It is hard upon her; she is so much handsomer than other women, and she likes to be admired and have her amusement. Maybe, it would have been a truer kindness if I had never married her, though she was worse off, and seemed unhappy, in her own home.' Still, he hardened his heart, and made no more efforts or sacrifices during the last few months to give Kate the pleasures she wished.

'I must make a stand some time; better now than too late,' he reflected, having learned wisdom, by experience of Kate's extravagances which he could ill afford, on former occasions.

The little household at Forde Manor thus lived through the month of May, with sunshine on their outer lives, and more or less of secret trouble in their hearts. But one notable incident remains to be told.

On that morning when Violet first found Jack's inscription on the beech-tree, and was accordingly late for breakfast, having spent nearly an hour, lost in thought, sitting on the mossy ground under the monarch of the wood—on that very same morning, Kate happened, by chance, to come down a little earlier than usual. There, on the breakfast-table, she saw, among an array of other letters awaiting Violet, one that caused her to start and gasp, while her temples throbbed, and the blood, arrested by her affected breathing, suffused her face dark red.

Jack's!—his writing! She was sure of it. Kate gave a cautious, quick glance round, and, seeing she was alone in the room, examined the post-mark with greedy, inquiring eyes. Yes; his! Not a doubt of it. Holding the

letter still in her hand, Mrs. O'Brien once more looked around her.

It was a terrible temptation to feel that envelope—Jack's very words hidden within it—in her own grasp. Yet Kate faltered; stood hesitating. Rufus had stepped through an open window, and was skimming the cream of the *Times* on the gravel terrace, whilst waiting for their young hostess. He had not even seen his wife enter the room. Violet, so the servants said, had not returned from her walk, so could know nothing of this letter. Was it one only of a correspondence opened between the lovers? Was it an appeal for reconciliation. *What was it?*

If at that moment Rufus had turned his head; if only Violet's voice could have sounded coming up the terrace-steps as usual from the flower-beds below, Kate would have put the letter down. But none of these things happened, and so—she left the room rapidly, with a noiseless, guilty step, carrying her prize with her.

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A few minutes later, Violet appeared, a little hurried and apologetic after hastening home. And, at the same time, a servant came in bearing a message that Mrs. O'Brien had a headache and would like her breakfast in her own room.

And so it was that, though Jack Ramsay watched and waited long, no answer ever came to his letter.

CHAPTER IV.

TURNING OVER A NEW LEAF.

It is a pretty well-established fact, that, if we have once allowed ourselves to do a secret injury to anyone, especially a friend, it is even more difficult to feel kindly towards them afterwards than if we were the aggrieved party ourselves.

'They never pardon who have done the wrong,'

is certainly not always true of those who are carried away by strong passions that may be counterbalanced by equally great and generous virtues. But, in the matter of Kate O'Brien's wrong-doing, its effect was to make her reproach herself, yet be all the more captious and queru-

lous towards unsuspecting Violet; ever on the look-out for faults in the latter to justify herself, as it were, for a deed more worthy of an enemy than a trusted friend. Of course Violet, being a good girl but faulty, and by no means angelic in patience, was often secretly rasped. She struggled hard to show forbearance, but several times a day betrayed vexation, or feared she had done so.

Even if she blamed herself unjustly for the latter fault, she felt the soreness in her heart all the same.

'I am getting to feel quite soured and wicked,' thought poor Violet, appalled at the self-revelations thus made as to her own capabilities for cherishing secret anger and uncharitableness. She was really being tried in a new way and gaining slowly the victory over herself, in spite of being often worsted; but she did not yet know that.

Kate O'Brien's struggles of mind were far more violent She alternated between passionate fits of penitence and wrathful broodings over the events of the late months, that had

made her such a miserable woman. Once or twice, she longed to bring back the happy school-days past when Violet and she had been as attached as sisters; for in truth she loved Violet, only she loved herself better.

But Violet, as was natural enough, shrank from these outbursts of affection; she could never again feel just the same towards Kate—not quite. And the latter guessed this and was galled.

Upstairs, in the secret drawer of her Japanese cabinet, lay Jack's letter still. Kate had opened it carefully, thinking at the time—if on reading the contents this action would serve her own ends—to close it again and allow its lawful owner to receive it. Now she still kept it, why, she hardly knew; but thought it safe in her own possession, and several times took it out to read again, harrowing her feelings by gazing on those familiar characters.

One day, the horror of what she had done so overcame Kate, being depressed already after a bad night, that she sank upon her knees and hid her face. She had never realized before the

whole wrong of her late actions; step by step, she had been drawn on till she had wilfully parted the two beings she best loved—and one of them who had so implicitly believed in her! The scene in Violet's bed-room rose up vividly before her. The great shining happiness in the girl's face, that she had slowly murdered with her own faltering words, till it died in stony-eyed despair. Kate O'Brien knew she had uttered an awful, terrible lie—but she knew, too, that never would Violet Vyvian marry the man she loved with all her heart and soul, whilst that word stood.

The guilty woman struggled up from her knees and looked at her pale face in the glass, then mechanically smoothed her ruffled hair.

'I must turn over a new leaf!' she resolved. 'Perhaps in time Violet will let me make it up to her, by being a better friend to her than I was even in the beginning. It's no use trying for that yet. But there is Rufus—I can always win him back. It will be a good deed to make him happy now, at least; for I've made him miserable enough sometimes, I'm afraid.'

Fired by her own remorse, and feeling her soul almost shriven already by this righteous determination, Kate lost no time in putting it into execution. She started off, then and there, to find her husband in some of his usual haunts. He was neither in the stables, the home farmyard, nor the kennels. Kate searched for him in vain in the study and the billiard-room, and after standing and shading her eyes, whilst looking through the grounds as far as she could see, she said to herself reluctantly,

'At Littleforde, as usual! I must pocket my pride and follow him there, I suppose.'

But, on ringing at the rose-hung porch of Littleforde, the trim maid who appeared could only say that Mrs. Beaumont and Miss Vyvian had gone down to the village to visit a sick old man. Mr. O'Brien had come to call also, but he had taken Miss Dolly out in her new cart, somewhere into the Forde Woods, she believed. With a slight curl of her lip, Kate walked rapidly away, and entered the Forde Park again in search of her truant spouse.

Taking a good deal of unwonted exercise in search of the blighted being to whom one means to make up for all late trippings by a future of such kindness as shall cause his happiness to blossom like the rose, is distinctly fatiguing, and had a somewhat deterrent effect on Kate's good intentions. She had walked two miles, was hot and tired, and her dress was slightly torn by scrambling over a fence and through some brambles to effect short cuts, when at last she emerged from the trees near the lake, giving up the chase. As she came slowly along the walk looking discontented, moody, and dejected, she suddenly perceived Cyril Vyvian standing smoking a cigarette with an air of calm enjoyment ahead of her. It was the first time they had met alone since his self-banishment, for he had avoided Forde.

Kate felt a little nervous, and her steps slackened. Cyril, on the contrary, exerted himself to approach her with apparently perfect self-possession but no haste.

'I am afraid you are tired; I have been watching you these few minutes, and you seem

to have had a fatiguing walk,' he politely remarked, merely lifting his hat in greeting.

Kate looked at him silently and darkly; in a swift second, in the first tone of his voice, she recognised that here was a changed man.

He had gone from her presence last a miserable wretch, who would have craved a word of kindness on his very knees. Now he returned looking open-faced and ruddy as usual, and his whole bearing and tone showed him master of his own mind and heart again—cured!

'I did not expect to have the pleasure of meeting you down here, away from your usual garden-hammock,' he went on, with the same carelessly cutting civility. 'I rode over to see my cousin Violet, and came this way on the chance of finding her.'

'I did not expect to meet you either,' haughtily answered Kate, with a defiant flash of her dark eyes; conscious of her torn dress, and of being seen altogether at a disadvantage. 'I am looking for my husband, so you will excuse my leaving you.'

'Have you not found him yet? The gardener

told me you were gone out an hour ago looking for him.'

Cyril's mocking tone of voice might have roused an angry reply from the woman who some months ago had played with his passionate adoration, as a cat with a mouse, but that a burst of childish laughter and a man's deeper tones sounded near. And round a turn in the walk, screened by bushes, came Dolly sitting proudly in a smart little market-cart of polished pine, drawn by a small pony, with Rufus running by her side, alternately exhorting the pony to get along, and wiping his forehead with a red silk handkerchief. They pulled up, on seeing the others.

'Whose cart is that? Where did Dolly get it?' asked Kate, imperiously, interrupting O'Brien's hearty greeting to Vyvian, whom he had not seen for some time back.

'It's her own cart. I built it for her myself,' returned Rufus, coolly.

'Yes. And he giv'd me my pony, too. It's mine own pony,' jubileed Dolly, exulting over the poor much-to-be-pitied other beings, who

owned no such a pony and vehicle, with which the Queen's glass coach would hardly have borne comparison in her opinion.

'You gave her the pony—and cart,' uttered Kate, slowly, as if disbelieving her ears. Then after a pause, swallowing down secret indignation at this 'waste of money,' (Rufus had denied himself some small luxuries to delight his little favourite with this crowning treat), 'I have been looking for you everywhere, Rufus. I wanted you to walk with me. Will you come back with us now?'

'Can't, my dear. Dolly wants to drive round the lake, and then I must take her home for her tea.'

'You can send one of the grooms with the child.'

'No, I won't. I promised to take her myself, and I would not disappoint little Dolly for anything you could give me.'

'Then you won't come——?'

Kate's dark eyes were large with pleading, her tone was hurt, but unusually gentle. Why did Rufus not *know* she really wanted him, her

heart was angrily crying out; in former days—not so long ago—his obedience to her least whims had been a proverbial joke. She was secretly appealing to him now, unless he was too blind and stupid to understand, not to shame her before Cyril Vyvian,—to do her bidding.

'Then you won't come——?'

'No; not now. You and Vyvian can keep each other company. You were always such good friends, you are sure not to quarrel. Now then, Dolly, we're off. Pull up, pony.' And away went Rufus, light-hearted and cheery, his mind so engrossed with his present charge that Kate's request had made little or no impression upon him. He little guessed what a cup of bitterness he left his wife to drink. As in a flash of lightning, the woman who stood looking after him realized that, as he had been so little to her, now she in turn was far, far less to him.

'Have I lost him, too?' was her thought, as she remained almost paralysed for a moment or two with surprise and indignation.

But, if Rufus did not read all this, another

beside her did. Cyril Vyvian, her former victim, observed, with a tone of slightly amused satisfaction,

'Ah! Mrs. O'Brien, you see the old adage comes true. If you will not when you may, when you will, you shall have nay. Have you no willing slave left—where is Ramsay?'

'Gone! As I wish you were, too. I hate you——' burst out Kate. Then she turned and left him.

Cyril, however, stayed on, and had afternoon tea with Violet and a stable-chat with O'Brien, who returned quite unwitting of his grievous fault. And so the days went on, but Rufus could not help noticing the altered demeanour both of Violet and his wife. Though a good, kind-hearted man, he was, as far as women were concerned, intensely stupid and dense. He had some sort of vague idea that Violet cared for Jack, and that something unpleasant had passed between them, but, if ever he tried with awkward kindness to gain any information from Violet on this point, she had invariably changed the conversation; nor had Kate assisted him,

always answering petulantly and telling him to 'mind his own business and not interfere in things he knew nothing about.' Still the depressed state of both women was apparent even to his perceptions. At last, a happy thought struck him. Women, he argued, always wanted excitement of some sort, and, hunting being over, there was not much to amuse them down at Forde. That was it! they both missed their hunting. If they could only hear the sound of the horn and the note of a hound once more, they would both brisk up. And so he turned matters over in his mind, till one day, after religiously spelling through the columns of his *Field*, and reading of the doings of other hounds, a brilliant idea struck him—why should not they start a pack of otter-hounds at Forde? Maturer consideration, however, showed this impracticable, for the very good reason that the necessary animal to hunt did not exist in the neighbourhood. No, this would not do, so he went off to the kennels to have a confab with Tom Harkholler. There he found that worthy walking the hounds out after feeding, and soon

was deep in kennel-lore with him. After some preliminary conversation, Tom began:

'I wanted to see you, sir, about the draft. We shall have a rare good entry this year, and must get rid of some of the old 'ounds. There are several with their toes down, and stifled, and, as we have plenty of their blood in the kennel, it is no good keeping them.'

At this moment a man came up to Tom, to ask for the loan of a couple of terriers to draw a badger. Then the thought flashed into Rufus' brain that these old hounds might be utilised to hunt badgers with, and have one more season's sport before they were despatched to the happy hunting-grounds. He had heard of such a thing being done before, and, though he knew old Tom would hardly see the force of pursuing the chase on foot—for the country now, in all the leafy glories of budding summer, was too blind to ride over—he yet hoped he would assent to the proposal, if approached judiciously; and so thus began:

'Look here, Tom, I have an idea about this draft. Miss Vyvian is missing her hunting very

much—for you know how much she loves hounds—so why shouldn't we hunt badgers with them?'

The old huntsman gazed at him in blank astonishment, as he replied,

''Unt badgers! And how, in 'Eaven's name, is anyone to ride over a country at this time of the year, sir?'

'No one talked about riding, Tom. What I propose is this. That we should form these hounds into a badger-pack. I'll hunt them, and Ned the second whipper-in shall turn them to me.'

'Well, well, sir, as you and Miss Vyvian please; but please don't ask *me* to go running and tumbling about in the dark after 'em. I'm getting an oldish man now, sir, and though—thank God—I can still 'unt a fox and cheer a 'ound, I don't know anything of the ways of them stinking vermin, badgers.'

Seeing the old man did not view the proposal with much favour, Rufus wisely said no more on the subject, and, after a little desultory

talk and settling what hounds were to be drafted, bid him good-evening, and walked back up to the house, old Tom soliloquising to himself, as he watched his retreating form,

'*Me* 'unt them beastly brutes! and on foot too. I'll see you *somewhere* furst, Mr. O'Brien! Besides, it's a hinsult to a *fox-'ound*, asking of 'im to do such a thing.'

That evening, after an unusually silent meal, the trio were sitting in the drawing-room. Violet was pretending to read, though her thoughts were straying far away to Jack. Kate lay back in an easy-chair, and was gazing listlessly into the fire, whilst Rufus fidgetted about the room.

At last he broke out:

'What is the matter with you two? You both seem awfully down. You want something to 'liven you up, I'm sure; so I've got an idea.'

Kate gazed languidly up at the burly form of her husband, who, for the purpose of delivering his words of wisdom, had taken up that

position so dear to the British male, viz., with his back to the fire, and a coat-tail under each arm.

With an effort, Violet roused herself, knowing anything Rufus might suggest was dictated by pure kindliness of heart; and, though she disavowed, with a faint smile, that her spirits were drooping, asked him what his proposal might be.

'Well,' he replied, turning towards her, 'I've been having a talk with old Tom about what hounds must be drafted this season; and there are at least five or six couple that must go—old Foxglove, Baneful, Lavish, and Careless have all got toes down; Pillager, Ransom, and Watchful are stifled; Lapwing, Saladin, and Beauty can't run up, and then there are about two couple and a half more that are no good. Now, my idea is this: that, as we can't hunt foxes in summer, let's form a badger-pack, and hunt badgers! I daresay, I can get a couple or two of old hounds from other packs; and I know old Jellybag will let me have some of his old harriers. Anyhow, we could scrape up some ten

or twelve couple. I'll hunt them, and Ned shall whip-in.'

'My dear Rufus, you are crazy! Do you imagine Violet and I are going to ride to hounds at this time of the year—and with all the horses thrown up for the season?' returned Kate, moving impatiently in her chair.

'There you go, old woman, rushing to conclusions, as usual,' laughed Rufus, good-humouredly. 'Who ever said anything about riding?'

'Well, but how are we to see any of the sport, if we don't ride?' questioned Violet.

'Why, on your ten toes, bedad!'

'But do you mean to run, too?'

'And why not? But, come now, will you agree to try the experiment? It is night-work, or rather peep-o'-day work; but I think it will be rather good fun.'

Violet meditated for a moment, and then, with the practical knowledge of hunting inherent in her, said,

'I have no objection, but suppose you get on the line of a fox, how are you going to stop

hounds? We shall have no end of cubs killed, and if *that* happens, I'll never forgive you,' she added, laughingly.

'O, I've thought of all that,' was the reply. 'I don't intend we should disturb any part of the country where there are foxes, but go down beyond Seacombe, and hunt the country by the sea. You know we never find there, as old Cockshot is fonder of pheasants than foxes, and so we can do no harm. It's a fine, rough, wild country, and we are sure of sport. We can all drive there and put up at the little inn, and have a rare good time of it.'

This last argument was a clincher, and so it was definitely settled that Rufus should have his way. Violet, as she wished him good-night, laughingly addressed him as the new M.B.H. (Master of Badger-hounds), and extracted a promise from him that he should present her with the first badger killed, stuffed in the form of a footstool.

So armed with Violet's authority, and by the exercise of a little judicious tact, Rufus eventually so far overcame Tom Harkholler's objec-

tions as to induce him to join in the sport, and take the hounds on to Seacombe, accompanied by Ned, the second whipper-in, a lithe, active young man, who had entered with zest into the proposal.

CHAPTER V.

BADGER-HUNTING.

By degrees, some twelve couple of hounds of various sorts and sizes had been got together.

Seacombe was a small fishing-village on the coast, fourteen or fifteen miles distant from Forde. It was a quiet, sleepy, little spot, nestling snugly on one side of a wooded combe, amid red, brush-covered cliffs that towered high above on each side. A little stream ran through the combe towards the sea, splashing and gurgling over moss-grown rocks and boulders into quiet pools below, whilst masses of ferns hung their graceful feathery fronds o'er the limpid water, and seemed to bend down to kiss

it in loving greeting. Below the village was a little bay, formed by sandstone cliffs, clothed here and there with scant patches of grass and the sea-loving thrift. On the shingly beach, upon which the surf broke with a dull monotonous roar, a number of picturesque fishing-boats were drawn up, whilst long lines of netting hung up to dry on posts and poles set up for the purpose, betokened the chief industry of the inhabitants. Altogether it was a calm and peaceful spot, one of many on our southern coast—such as artists and repose-loving folk love—and with the exception of a few such votaries, and an occasional reading-party, Seacombe was not much troubled by visits from the outer world of mankind. It lay wide of the Marshwood Vale country, in fact on its extreme border, and from the impracticability of its fences, the smallness of its enclosures, and the known aversion to foxes of the resident squire—one Mr. Cockshot, a wealthy parvenu, who took no interest in hunting—was seldom visited by Violet's hounds.

The cliffs and surrounding country were regular strongholds of badgers, and this, with

the improbability of getting on the line of a fox, had caused Rufus to select the place for his début as a badger-huntsman.

Accordingly one lovely night towards the middle of June, about twelve o'clock, the Forde Manor party, joined by Cyril Vyvian, the Blatherwicks, and a few others, started for Seacombe. Rufus had managed to put four horses together, and was to handle the ribbons. It was a lovely moonlight night, and as the two bays, chestnut, and a grey, that formed the team, settled down into their places, and rattled along at a good twelve miles an hour trot, Violet felt her spirits rise. The night air was fresh and crisp, as it crept through the tree-tops and stirred them gently, whilst from every bank and hedgerow the sweet fragrance of wild flowers floated upwards. Bats flitted here and there, busy in quest of insect prey, and the only sounds audible were the bark of some sheep-dog by a distant cottage, or the harsh weird note of a night-jar, as it floated by in its moth-like flight. Horses invariably go well at night, to which rule Rufus' team were no exception, and

there was something cheery and exhilarating as their hoofs rang merrily with rhythmical precision on the road. Cyril too, who was a good performer on the coaching-horn, had brought his 'yard of tin' with him, and enlivened the party with an occasional solo. Altogether, none suffered from sleepiness, and, despite the fact that no repose awaited them that night, seemed all bent on keen enjoyment; and in this even Kate seemed to participate.

There is something in the influence of the cool night air, particularly when combined with the prospect of a novel kind of sport, that stirs even the most lethargic dispositions, and all the occupants of the drag were in the highest of spirits.

The road for a short distance was comparatively level, but after a bit led up over some wooded hills, where the dark shadows of sombre fir-trees and towering elms flickered and danced across the road. As they advanced, these constant rises and depressions necessitated a slower rate of progress, and it was close on two o'clock ere Rufus pulled up at

the little village inn. This rejoiced in the name of 'The Quiet Woman,' and the sign-post, consisting of a headless lady roughly delineated, afforded an explanation of its curious nomenclature. As Violet, Kate, Mrs. Blatherwick, and one or two other ladies alighted and disappeared within the hospitable portals of the 'Quiet Woman,' in order to divest themselves of their wraps, lights flashed here and there from cottage windows up the tiny village street, showing that the arrival of the party and the strange sound of a coaching-horn had awakened the sleepy inhabitants to a sense that something unusual was occurring in their midst. The hounds had come by a shorter route, and were waiting the arrival of the party at a spot about a mile-and-a-half away. The ladies soon reappeared in short skirts and tight-fitting jackets, armed with stout sticks, and well set-up for a early morning's scramble across country, and then the little band set off to walk to the meet, followed by sundry of the fisher-folk impelled by motives of curiosity.

Leaving the village, a sharp climb up a stony

winding path that led through a mass of scrub oak brought them to the top of the cliffs which sloped downwards to the sea. This was a noted resort of badgers, and the ground for some distance around was honey-combed by their earths. The fresh soil drawn out showed that they were well used, but a substantial faggot stuffed into each hole, with a stout stake driven through it, denoted plainly that Rufus' orders about stopping had been carefully attended to. Badgers, as everyone knows, are night-feeding animals, and only leave their earths when the shades of evening close in, and so the labour of stopping not only these earths, but several others for some surrounding distance, had entailed no inconsiderable toil. Mr. Cockshot's keeper, however,—with the prospect of a 'tip,' and having been judiciously well buttered by the diplomatic Ned, to whom all arrangements had been entrusted,—had done his work well, and there seemed little prospect if a badger were once found, of his getting to ground. After following the line of the cliffs a little way, the path diverged across some corn-fields the

green blades of which were sprouting luxuriantly from the rich soil, and soon a group of pedestrians standing by a farm-house near a wood, with one solitary horseman among them, denoted the trysting-place.

What a strange scene it was! The white walls of the old farm-house, partly shadowed by a tangled growth of ivy and creepers, shone out in strong contrast to the dark clearly-cut outlines of the tall leafy elms that surrounded it and the sombre depths of the covert in rear that cast long shadows on the grass-fields, now looking white in the pale moonlight. In the distance hedgerows growing on high banks, and other trees, gradually faded into dim silhouettes enveloped in shrouds of mist that rose from each brook and streamlet in the valley beyond. Away seaward the moon shone out with brilliant effulgency, touching with mellow light rock and wave, and gleaming on the white sails of some small ships far out on the horizon. It was a scene to be felt as well as viewed, and more than one of the party inwardly asked themselves why they had hitherto missed so much

enjoyment by over-attention to the demands of the drowsy god Somnus.

Violet was strangely fascinated by the scene, and standing a little apart with Cyril drank in every surrounding detail with mute and overpowering admiration.

'How *very*, *very* lovely it all is!' she murmured, a soft light coming into her eyes. Ah! what would she not have given had *one other* been there to enjoy it with her!

'Yes,' answered Cyril, 'it is. How much we miss by keeping such late hours. Do you know, Violet, I'd give a great deal to be able to paint this scene, with just one figure in the foreground, with the moonlight falling on it;' and he looked tenderly at the girl, who was the nearest approach to a friend and sister he had ever known.

'Who might that be?' broke in Kate's voice at his elbow, laughingly. 'Old Tom, I suppose; though I don't think, from the sour expression on his face, he'd be quite in keeping with this bit of Arcady.'

Cyril gave a little dry laugh, and turned

away with a look of annoyance on his face at having his dreamy reverie thus interrupted by the woman who had not so long ago laughed at his feelings for *her* with derision.

In the meantime, Rufus had been having a conversation with Mr. Cockshot's keeper about the most likely place to find, and futilely endeavouring to persuade old Tom to accompany them on foot; but the only response he got from that worthy, whom his midnight jog had by no means improved in temper, was, 'No, thank'ee, sir, no thank'ee; I ain't a-goin' to break my neck a-runnin' down these ere 'ills. I'll jist sit on my hoss, and watch you 'unt your badger. And,' he added, sarcastically, 'maybe I might learn a wrinkle or two!'

Another quarter-of-an-hour, and then it will be dawn; so Rufus, after calling to Violet, and preceded by Mr. Cockshot's keeper, moves off. They are to throw off near a strong head of earths, and try to hit a drag from thence, and pass across a couple of grass-fields to do so. The hounds and men seem like spectres in the dim half-light that precedes the dawn, for the

glimmer of stars and the waning beauty of the moon have gradually become less.

At last, as they neared the earths, there was a feathering of sterns and a mute thrill of excitement seemed to shoot through the pack like an electric shock, showing that *something* was on foot. Old Pillager threw his tongue in no undecided manner, Watchful, Lapwing, and Careless joined in to proclaim a find. Guider (one of Mr. Jellybag's harriers) added his testimony, and then, with a crash and drive, the whole body of the pack took up the chorus.

'Huic to Pillager; huic together! huic!' cheers Rufus, his great jolly face beaming with excitement as he prepares for the somewhat difficult task of running after hounds over rough ground in an uncertain light. The white forms of the hounds show out dimly as they crash through the tall hazel-grown bank that divides the field they are in from a wide expanse of wild, undulating country. Over a rolling stretch of heather and gorse hounds run on at undiminished speed, tailing somewhat, though, in the process. Ned is well up with them, his

slim, active figure being more suited for running than that of Rufus, who is toiling along behind. Thus they run along the side of a hill, some half-way down it; the rest of the field, with the exception of a few enthusiasts, keeping up parallel with them on the top.

And now dawn is breaking; all animate creation in sky and on earth begins to wake up and move. Larks, those 'bright messengers of day,' soar upwards trilling forth their sweet pæan of praise; from copse and meadow, thrush and blackbird burst forth into song; chaffinches flit hither and thither chirping cheerily; lapwings dash about overhead in their curious gyrating flight, uttering an alarmed cry, whilst the cuckoo adds his spring note to the volume of bird melody. The cry of the hounds sounds merrily as they press on intoxicated with the delights of the—to them—novel scent of a new description of prey. Far away in the east a faint streak of light appears which gradually deepens into a flush of pinkish pearly grey; this again in its turn melts into a flood of glorious light as Phœbus rises in all his might,

glancing in golden splendour on the rugged cliffs, touching up with his rays the tiny wavelets far out at sea that seem to dance and scintillate with joy at his warm matutinal kiss. White sea-birds are wheeling and floating overhead, screaming as they swoop down on their finny prey beneath. As the sun gets higher and higher, the mists disperse; 'the shadows flee away,' and hillside and wood emerge from the soft and dubious light of night into the more perceptible though perhaps garish one of day.

Yes, it was a glorious sight, and Violet's and even Kate's spirits, as they felt the soft pure breath of morning, rose involuntarily. But now hounds turn to their right, and slip down into the valley, over deep rich pastures where the cattle stand chewing the cud of contentment, revelling in the sweet fresh grass. Then at last a fallow brings down the noses of the pack. Slowly and patiently they puzzle out the line across this, and reach a road. Here they are at fault, and can carry the scent no further.

Now is the time for Rufus to make his cast. Had he been hunting a *fox*, he would of course

have held hounds forward, but with a badger it might be different. The sun was now well up, and the dew, that had for the last twenty minutes been all in favour of scent, was now rapidly vanishing; he was certainly perplexed, and was debating in his mind what to do—should he hold hounds on, down the road, up the road, forward or back?—when at last from a little knoll by a wooded dingle a shrill holloa was borne on the breeze. All the Marshwood Vale hounds cocked their ears at the well-known voice, and broke away with a cry. Yes, it was old Tom, and they knew it.

'Hark halloa! hark halloa! hark halloa!' screamed Rufus and Ned together, cracking their whips, as the pack stream away towards their old huntsman. Tom sits on his horse with cap held high in air, looking like an equestrian statue in the clear morning light, and hounds soon catch sight of him.

'Yooi over in there, Pillager, old man. Yooi in, Careless, good bitch,' cheers the old man, as the leading hounds dash up to him, waving them into cover where he has seen the badger enter.

'Dashed if it's bad fun, after all,' he says to himself, catching the enthusiasm of the sport, as the pack crash their way through bramble and fern, making the depths of the dingle re-echo with their cry. Music, 'tis said, hath 'charms to soothe the savage breast.' This may be so, but we dare aver more, and state as a *positive fact* that, however cross, worried or annoyed a man may be, the music of a pack of hounds, an he have the slightest dash of sporting blood running in his veins, will dispel all traces of sorrow, wrath, or annoyance, and make life generally appear more cheery and bright. So it was with the worthy huntsman. Quick as lightning he instinctively made up his mind where *he* would go were he the badger (and this was pretty much what the badger thought). *He* certainly should not break and face the open country with all this infernal din resounding in his ears—and then that awful apparition in boots and breeches! it was enough to frighten any decent, repose-loving animal out of his wits! No, no open country for him. He would just scramble along over the rocks

and loose stones, then through the stream at the bottom of the dingle, till he reached yonder gorse—this would shelter and hide him from view, and he then could shuffle along that high double bank till he reached the top of the next hill—and *then*, ah! then he could laugh at them all, for another couple of fields (all down-hill too) would land him at his doorstep, at the top of the cliffs by the sea, where they all might yell and howl themselves hoarse before they would see *him* again!

These thoughts were also uppermost in old Tom's mind. All his ideas about not riding to hounds at this time of the year seemed to vanish, and, turning the stout cob, he rode at a great, green, bush-grown bank. With a 'Come hup, 'oss!' he crashed in and crashed out; an open gate at the end of the next field, and an easy gap or two rewarded him, for he caught up hounds as they emerged from the end of the dingle and ascended the steep gorse-grown hill on their left.

On hearing Tom's holloa, Violet, Mrs. Blatherwick and Kate had all been going to it, indeed

the two latter had set off running for that purpose; but Cyril, whispering to Violet, 'Hold hard for a moment,' induced her to stay. Presently, noticing Tom's movements, he said, 'We need not go down there, let us run on here,' and, Violet consenting, they both set off at a round trot. Subsequent events proved them right, for, after a run of about a mile, during which they had to scramble over innumerable high hazel and bramble-grown banks which necessitated Cyril's giving Violet a helping hand, and lifting her down—a to him by no means unpleasant duty—they reached the high-road that ran along the top of the cliffs. Pulling up for an instant to regain their breath, they saw a little dark form scramble over the bank some hundred yards down the road and shuffle across.

'There he is!' whispered Violet, panting with excitement and from the effects of her run; 'don't holloa, though,' she added, as the cry of the hounds came nearer and nearer.

They were running well, and she was too good a sportswoman to interfere with hounds by holloaing and getting their heads up. Across

the road hounds dash eagerly, their hackles bristling for blood, only two hundred yards behind their quarry—then over the opposite fence and away they stream up the rough grass-field that bounds the line of cliffs. Alas, for the poor badger! the well-known refuge was closed to him, no time to dig himself in with that awful cry resounding in his ears. He must make one more effort. Some half-mile further on there is a nice cool drain where ere now when belated after some midnight ramble he has found a pleasant lodging; so with failing strength he shuffles off, threading his way over a stunted thorn and gorse-grown common.

'Wough, wough, wough!' sound old Pillager's and Saladin's deep notes. 'Yap, yap, yap!' go the terriers, as they get closer and closer to him.

'Oh! this is awful!' mutters the poor badger to himself. 'Will these fiends *never* let me alone? I wish to goodness I had not eaten all those young rabbits I dug out last night. I can't go any further, so, d——n it, I'll stay here and fight it out, and die as a badger

should die,' and with this resolve he crept in under a thick thorn-bush. He has not to wait long; nearer and nearer comes that awful cry, added to by the cheers of the biped pursuers, till at last he can stand it no longer and bolts out. Ransom, Bounty, and Careless catch a view, and in another moment badger and hounds go tumbling over and over in a confused heap. Snap—scrunch—snarl!' and then a cry of 'Pen-an-ink!' as the foremost hounds to grip him go limping off, bearing the mark of his keen white teeth. He is up and on his legs in a moment, and off again. Then commences a running fight. Hounds do not understand the game, and can make but little impression on that tough skin; besides, the badger keeps his head and neck bent well down over his only vulnerable spot, to wit, his chest. Tom has now come up and jumped off his horse, leaving that estimable quadruped to take care of himself, as he whoops, and holloas, and cheers on the pack; but it is of no good, and even the hounds that were keenest at first now seem to fight shy of tackling their plucky foe.

Violet does not like it. It was all very well when the keen excitement of the chase was upon her, but she cannot bear to see this apparently useless worry going on, and her tender woman's nature rebels against inflicting unnecessary pain.

'Oh! why can't they kill the poor thing?' she appeals to Cyril. But Cyril is as much a novice at this game as are all the rest, and it is not till Rufus comes panting up that any steps are taken to end the tragedy. Under his directions Ned, while one of the periodical worries is going on, loops the thong of his hunting-whip round one of the badger's hind-legs, and then, twisting it up tight, holds him up in the air, while the pack bay round him; then Rufus hits the poor wriggling beast one sharp cut across the nose, and his troubles are o'er.

'Whoo-whoop!' he shouts, holding him up above the baying pack, 'whoo-whoop, tear 'im and eat 'im,' and with this he throws the carcase high in the air. In a moment the pack are swarming and struggling over their dead enemy like a hive of bees, tugging and pulling at his

tough hide with all the fury of pent-up feelings of revenge.

At last the obsequies are performed and the party return to Seacombe; and, as old Tom gets his hounds together preparatory to moving off home, he turns to Rufus, and, with a touch of his cap and a merry twinkle in his eye, says,

'Well, sir, 'taint such bad fun, arter all, and I don't mind if I do have another turn at it some day; only,' he adds, 'I'm jiggered if you'd a' killed your badger if *I* 'adn't a' 'elped you!'

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE HEALTHERIES.

It was the last week of June, and Violet Vyvian found herself staying in London and in the thick of most of its gaieties for a fortnight.

An invitation had come rather unexpectedly from the family of two former school-friends. Perhaps the Vereker girls wanted to repay an exciting visit to Forde Manor last winter; when they had hunted more than ever before in their lives, and looked up to Violet as the most happy, lucky, and altogether adorable girl of their acquaintance, something between Diana, Kate Coventry, and the pleasant school-fellow they had all liked. Perhaps Mrs. Vereker had an

eye to future days, when her eldest son might succeed—after the deaths of a grandfather and an intervening uncle—one never knows! to a title.

Anyhow, Violet welcomed the offer of a break from the monotonous, yet so changed, life at Forde. She had disregarded some regretful allusions of Kate O'Brien's to the former summer, when they went up to town together, Violet taking rooms for both, and being chaperoned by her friend. Last year was very different. Now they might meet Jack Ramsay—and Violet winced from the thought of even seeing him, by merest chance, when at Kate's side.

Kate, in truth, had an equal longing to so confront him; to hurt him, if by no other means to move the young man's feelings. But, seeing Miss Vyvian's reluctance to take such hints, some pride left helped her to keep silent, and she endured her seclusion as best she might.

After all, Kate reflected, Ramsay might not be in town just then; gunners have not perpetual leave. Violet said the same to herself,

and believed she even hoped so. But, nevertheless, she did, by purest chance, see him; and it was on this wise:

One evening, when all agreed they were tired of hot theatres and crushes, and were not going to any dance, Violet's hosts and a party of friends dined at the Health Exhibition, to enjoy a special fête in the Horticultural Gardens afterwards.

Towards ten o'clock, when the summer night was dark, and myriads of fairy electric lights of all colours were twinkling in the trees and outlining the flower-beds, it was a charming scene. Then the great fountain shot up into a high, snowy-white column that broke into smoke-like spray. It died away, but softly mounted again higher and still higher, but this time rosy, as if bathed in sunset light; next, it changed into a succession of ever-different hues.

Violet, though now far from easily stirred to real pleasure, and forcing her gaiety of late at all parties, was delighted with the sight. The Grenadier Guards' band was playing behind her among the trees. (How well, after-

wards, she recalled the very air!) The fountain ceased once more; then, for the last time, it welled up higher than ever before, as it seemed, in a tide of crimson: a great blood-red spire of wavering colour against the night-sky, that was of a veiled, mysteriously luminous, greyish blue.

'How beautiful!' came from Violet's lips; and the wish rose into her mind—as always lately, when any scene aroused her interest or admiration—'If only *he* were here now, beside me, and that all had been different!'

At that very minute, she saw the man after whom her thoughts were yearning.

There was an open space in front of where Violet and the Vereker party sat, that was brightly illuminated for a few yards by electric light. All around was shadow under the trees.

Out of the semi-darkness Jack Ramsay came, with a group of two or three friends, right across the lighted area. There was no mistaking that tall, straight figure from the first glimpse she caught of him in the crowd. Violet started violently in her chair, then her

heart began throbbing hard. He was walking slowly—listlessly, she fancied—with a very pretty, well-bred looking woman. The latter was smart, and charmingly dressed, so Violet's feminine observation told her in that brief space of time.

Three or four steps, and they were quite close! Violet could have touched Jack's arm, he passed so near. Would he see her in the doubtful light? His name rose to her lips; it seemed for a brief second too hard to forbear uttering it. The trial of seeing him so near—yet so far removed—was greater than the poor girl could have ever believed possible; it was bliss, yet exquisite torture, to behold him again, even thus, when——

The pretty woman, just as they approached, looked right up in Jack's face with an expression of deepest interest, and surely of a warmer feeling! saying something (but Violet, though listening with all her powers, could not catch what it was), with a half-injured, laughing air, as in mock reproach.

Unconsciously Violet held her breath, strained

her ears to keenest intensity to hear Jack's answer just as he passed by.

And Jack, turning his head slightly, gave from his superior height a downward answering look at his bewitching companion, with—oh, heavens!—the same glance of affection in his dark-grey eyes that Violet knew so well; while the old sudden smile, that had so often made her heart rejoice with silent singing, broke like momentary sunshine over the otherwise almost stern regularity of his manly features.

'What nonsense!' he said, in that tone of chiding fondness a man uses towards a child, or a woman he loves. If she had not remembered every inflection of his voice, that had once sounded so honest and true in her ears, so musical and deep, the unguessed listener might not have distinguished the words. 'You know I am always as happy as I ever can be, when I am with you.'

Two more steps or so, and they passed into the further shadow of the trees with the moving crowd, and were lost to view.

Behind them, the watcher had turned sick at

heart from that momentary sight; the words she heard seemed to have fallen like lead upon her consciousness. As in a dream, Violet knew that Major Ball also went by after his friend, talking to two other men. She used to think him a harmless and amusing little mortal, but now his excitable old-boyish voice sounded so odiously chattering, she vaguely wondered that anyone could endure him. At the same moment, one of the Vereker girls exclaimed beside her,

'*What* a handsome man that was who has just passed us!—the tall one, with the lady in white and yellow. Did any one of you see him?'

'Did we?' answered another voice of the party. 'I should rather think so. Why, he looks one in a thousand! I'd give my eyes to know him. Miss Vyvian, did you notice him?'

'O—yes,' returned Violet, mechanically.

The Guards' band was still playing its same delicious strains, but she did not listen. The coloured lights still glistened around in the branches like great fireflies, or burned like big glowworms on the grass, but they had

no more attraction for one pair of lovelorn maiden's eyes.

That is how we usually meet in after-life those we have loved and been parted from. One moment they appear to our eyes once more in the great procession of human life that is always moving on, on around us, and we therewith, to the grave. One look! no more; then they pass out of sight again. But that one look, that single momentary vision, may leave a bitterness behind which sweeps away all the cherished memories, the fond illusions, and maybe, too, our patience and resignation, the fruit of weary sorrowing weeks, or even years.

So with Violet. She could know nothing of what Ramsay had thought and felt of late—as little as of what would happen to him in coming days. Only, having seen him, her heart swelled while she bitterly thought,

'He is quite happy! . . . . What a fool I have been—and I once thought him so true! Nothing seems true but what is bad or sorrowful—nothing matters.'

As they rose soon and turned towards the lighted glass front of the exhibition, some of the party called on Miss Vyvian to admire the pond, where fairy-like lights seemed shining in the hearts of sleeping water-lilies. But her enthusiasm had turned cold.

'You are tired, dear; or perhaps you have a headache,' whispered one of her friends later, noticing that Violet looked pale and strange.

She forced a laugh.

'Not at all. I was not myself, perhaps, a little while ago; but I am quite well now.'

CHAPTER VII.

FOR AULD LANG SYNE.

During the next two or three days, Violet, in the Verekers' opinion, began to enjoy herself highly. She talked so unceasingly, laughed at the smallest joke, was ready for everything in the way of amusement, and never wanted to be still a moment.

'What energy you have! You will exhaust yourself quite before going back to the country; positively, Violet, you are my idea of perpetual motion,' expostulated one of the Vereker girls, when Violet, after dancing till daylight at one of the best balls of the season, scouted the idea of going to bed, and, after taking a bath

instead, went out for an early gallop to freshen her up, she said, in the company of the son of the house.

Conny Vereker had hit exactly on her guest's secret wish.

'If I only could quite exhaust myself,' thought poor Violet. She wanted to be so tired that sleep might come the instant her weary head touched the pillow; by day she must be too busy to have a moment to think. To herself her own talk seemed pointless chatter; often she caught herself saying utter nonsense mechanically, with her mind far away (down in the Forde woods). Her laughter was such a forced mirthless sound in her own ears, she scornfully wondered it deceived anyone.

Young Vereker was so taken with Violet's riding that he persuaded her to ride with him and his sister every morning in the Park. This was what Violet liked best. She felt most at home in the saddle, and enjoyed the secretly flattering knowledge that, however other girls she met might surpass her in absolute loveliness, in high position, in fortune, too—since the

world's best all comes to our great world-market of London—on horseback, at least, there were few, if any, to whom she could not have shown the way. A sudden longing for excitement, a spirit of emulation seized upon her. If she had been a man, Violet would have gambled during those days; being a woman, she flirted.

Flirting goes surely by comparison. An amount of admiration that was to Kate O'Brien only as the breath of her nostrils was somewhat strong incense to Violet. It would not turn her head. An open-faced, honest-hearted, good specimen of an English girl she would remain; but the chances were that she might grow disgusted with the game. All her nature really asked was a love she could openly claim and return in the eye of day; and she liked to have men-friends, too. To go out deliberately on the war-trail, for scalps that were a useless prize, had no real fascination for her.

However, Miss Vyvian, as was said before, took decided pleasure for the present in finding that men were eager to vie with each other for the chance of a turn or two down the Row beside

her on horseback. She heard that her horsemanship was considered, by a good many, one of the morning sights; and enjoyed noticing that she was often pointed out by some of the crowd walking up and down this fashionable treadmill, as the M.F.H. of the Marshwood Vale hounds, while admiring eyes as frequently followed her. Violet grew insensibly a little harder in her manner; her talk became slightly horsey with the men who came round her.

When the girl returned to lunch and slipped off her habit, she felt depressed, and disliked herself, remembering her morning conversation, and how she had entered into hunting and stable subjects with a sporting zeal that so short a while ago she would have detested in another woman. 'As if hunting were the business of life, instead of being only one of our chief pleasures,' she used to say, when told with rather wondering admiration that no one had ever accused her of being horsey, or vainglorious of her singular situation as a young woman. Indeed, Violet rather prided herself on her quietness of manner in the hunting-field as in the

drawing-room. Yet, surely, few of her sex ever more keenly enjoyed the pleasure of a good hunting-run, the glorious exhilaration of a fast forty minutes, when mounted on a first-rate hunter,—

> 'Hard held, the breath of his nostrils broad,
> With the golden ether blended;
> Then the leap, the rise from the springy turf,
> The rush through the buoyant air,'—

all the delight of our chief national pastime, whereof poor Gordon, the English-born poet of Australia, so well sang.

'After all,' thought Violet, dispiritedly, 'I *am* nothing else in the eyes of society here but an M.F.H. It is my future lot in life, so fate seems to point out—my *raison d'être*, one might say.'

A chief reason that caused Violet's riding to be specially remarked before that of several other good lady-riders—however easily distinguished she was in the crowd of queer horse-women, fat females in their forties, aged aristocratic dames with nut-cracker visages and braided hair, girls who sat all awry, or holding

on by their bridles, ill-mounted, ill-looking, or ill-habited an assemblage, that it is often such a wonder to see in Hyde Park—was the horse on which young Vereker had persuaded her to trust herself. This was a very handsome chestnut of his own, but high-spirited and with an evil reputation.

'I want to show the fellows that a lady *can* ride it. And, if any lady can, you are the one,' said the young fellow, frankly.

The other young men in his regiment, one of the Household Brigade, were always chaffing Reggy Vereker about his purchase. When they began to be funny on the subject he quite dreaded their wit, for, although the soul of good humour, he knew himself to be a very poor rider. Perhaps he wished to sell the beast at no great disadvantage.

So Violet rode the chestnut, managing it capitally, it must be said. No great fault could be found with the animal's looks; for standing on good flat legs, with deep arched ribs, good back, loins and quarters, and a lean, game, well set-on head and neck, he was a horse sure

to attract attention anywhere, though critics might perhaps have taken exception to his shoulders which were a trifle straight. A close observer, however, would have noticed a certain showing of the whites of his eyes and a somewhat sour expression on his face; this coupled with a habit of striking out behind impatiently when kept standing still for long, and the pale washy colour of his chestnut coat, showed that he was not the sweetest-tempered animal in the world. When she had ridden Capsicum, as the horse was called, two or three days, Violet was disagreeably surprised one evening by hearing a well known baa-lamb kind of voice accosting her.

'How-do, Miss Vyvian? Glad to see you looking so well; nothing like a little time in London for rubbing the country rust off all of us, is there? Aw, I'll take a turn with you, I think.' And Lord Guisard coolly wheeled his horse in beside Violet, cutting out thereby another man, for they had all halted at the top of the ride to see the Princess of Wales drive in with her three daughters, a mounted policeman having

just appeared heralding the royal victoria. His lordship then put one finger to his hat by way of acknowledging Conny Vereker's bow, feebly murmuring,

'Fraid you have made a mistake . . . have I ever had the pleashaw? Aw; staying with *you* last winter, Miss Vyvian; of course—I remember.'

Nothing could have exceeded the condescending affability of tone with which he denoted that Violet's acquaintances were his, though otherwise he would have forgotten such insignificant individuals.

Absolutely the man *would* not be shaken off. Forward and back he resolutely rode, sticking to Violet's side like a leech, irritating her all at once so much that she irritated the chestnut in turn. For—suddenly Violet had perceived some distance down the Park, at a quiet spot under the trees, a tall solitary figure leaning on the rails. It is not given to many men to look so distinguished in a frock coat and tall hat as Jack Ramsay. Of most men so arrayed, a woman, at least, thinks criticisingly,

'They might not be amiss in pink; or in boating-flannels; or in rough shooting-clothes and knicker-bockers;' for surely there was seldom or never in all history a gala costume worn by the male sex, in which any personal advantages of the man over his fellows were less apparent than in the fashionable, stiff, black garb of nowadays. But even in it Ramsay still showed his superiority. He would have looked handsome in a smock-frock and penny chip-hat; in a miner's rough garments, begrimed with toil; it mattered little.

Immovably the figure remained there, as they rode up and down for half-an-hour; stayed alone. Violet dared not look except from a distance, lest seeming to recognise him fully she would be obliged to bow; but yet she contrived to know that he was watching herself. How maddening that Lord Guisard should be beside her! No doubt this was Jack's first glimpse of her since that evening they parted, and he might foolishly imagine—— Quite so; that was just what he was doing.

Over half-an-hour! would Goosey never go?

Violet tried to be as rude as her nature was capable of allowing her to be. But she might as well have tried to prick a pachyderm with a pin.

Nearly an hour gone by! and still the solitary figure remained there watching.

Meantime, the chestnut tossed his head and fretted and pulled till the foam-flakes were lying on his neck. It was certainly a pretty sight to see Violet controlling him; but Ramsay, watching with anxious though admiring eyes, thought it dangerous. At last, feeling more fretted than her mount, indeed secretly miserable, Violet proposed going home. She thought a good deal that night.

Next morning a ride after twelve o'clock was under discussion.

'Yes, willingly—it is much more pleasant than in the evening,' assented Miss Vyvian. In her own mind she thought, '*He* is not likely to be there, and so I need not be tortured by seeing him.' Yet she was longing to do so all the same. And, the very first time their little cavalcade cantered down the ride, there he was at the same spot.

Capsicum was full of caprices and high spirits this morning. Perhaps he remembered he had been naughty yesterday, and had then found his rider's temper less even than usual, which roused him to try for mastery again; or else it seemed poor fun to go everlastingly up and down the same stretch of ride. Once or twice was well enough; the third time he grew bored, and by way of relieving his feelings changed his easy canter with a kick or two into a gallop. In spite of her efforts at restraint, Violet knew in a moment or two he meant going at his own sweet will.

Down the ride they flashed; the chestnut with his head down, yawing and tearing at his bit; Violet—sitting square in her saddle, but immovable, and leaning well back—was doing her best to control the headstrong brute as he tore madly on.

The riding groups cleared in the twinkling of an eye to either side. People started up from their seats to gaze after the pair from the rails. Would she stop him; would she not?

A few seconds of real anxiety. A long-drawn 'Ah——!' of relief.

Far away down the reddish track of the tree-bordered stretch people saw a man's figure diving out from under the rails and running towards the middle of the ride. As the horse neared him, he tried to stop it. Madness!—he will only be hurt himself. Nothing to be descried from a distance but a momentary struggling, indistinguishable group. Then it was clear the chestnut's runaway course was arrested. The lady riding him was saved!

In the first shock of finding Capsicum's bridle caught hold of, and seeing Jack Ramsay, bare-headed, struggling with the horse—for he was her rescuer—Violet could not speak. She felt a little upset by the strain on her own arms and nerves, for it had flashed through her mind that she was rapidly becoming powerless, and then it was certain there would be an accident.

But she was still more dumbfounded at seeing that handsome face looking up flushed red with exertion, the forehead veins swelling

out visibly, his eyes alight. Jack Ramsay stood patting the chestnut's neck till the latter was quieted; but he was utterly silent save for the eagerly pleading expression of his gaze.

'*Thank you!*' uttered Violet, with lips that trembled despite herself. She had not strength to add a single word.

Other people surrounded her at that moment; among them young Vereker riding up; and Lord Guisard on foot puffing like a grampus from a short run of a few yards. Ramsay turned away, and picking up his tall hat that had fallen at a little distance, brushed the earth from it coolly, and made his way quickly out of the Park.

He had got his reward, and from her own lips.

After this incident, Violet was much exercised in her own mind what course to pursue. Should she write once again to Ramsay expressing her gratitude? (It must be remembered she supposed he had taken her dismissal in total silence. This, although it was what she had

requested him to do—instead of questioning her decision—yet seemed very slighting on his part, quite careless of her feelings, when one came to think of it.)

And, now, he had placed her under an obligation; just what she did not wish.

Yet, stay; Violet did wish it. Yes, she decidedly rejoiced in her heart that this opportunity had occurred. For, see, Jack Ramsay had behaved thoughtlessly, even cruelly towards herself, since he ought to have known she would never have given him her love had her eyes been opened to his strong flirtation with her friend. Now he had acted bravely and chivalrously. Violet was very glad that he had so, in a manner, righted himself; she knew he had good, ay, noble qualities, though alas! he was so fickle and inconstant in affections.

Of course Lord Guisard and Reggy Vereker both declared there had never been any real danger—to Violet herself. They treated Jack's conduct as rash and officious; serve him right if he had been knocked down! Violet inwardly

believed she could not have stopped Capsicum except by blessed chance, whatever they might say, and *his*, Ramsay's risk, remained the same.

Still she hesitated for two whole days whether to write or not; telling herself they might meet again in Rotten Row (she did not know Jack's club), when, on the third morning, a letter put an end to her doubts. It was from Ramsay, who had managed to find out she was staying with the Verekers, and it was written, not from town, but from Aldershot:

'If you think the slight service I was happy enough to render you in the Park merits any more reward—though your thanks were quite sufficient—will you give a home to the favourite I value most, old Harlequin? Treat him kindly and ride him straight for his master's sake, who, in a few days, will be on his way to India, not to return for several years, hoping there to forget the wretched past.

'You know all the old horse can do, so I need

not tell you; but, if I may ask one more favour, it is not to let anyone ride him *but yourself.* You will, I know, grant this for auld lang syne to—

'Your true friend always,

'J. RAMSAY.'

Violet's heart swelled as she read this. Going to India for several years! Somehow the idea came like a thunderbolt, and yet she had never meant to see Jack Ramsay again.

Growing calmer, presently, she appreciated Jack's thought. He was making her virtually a farewell gift of what he most valued of his worldly goods, and putting it as a favour to himself. That was gracefully, kindly done, like his old self; and—he could not be intending to marry that other lady now, at least. Why did he not offer her Harlequin?

So, without hesitation this time, a little note was written.

'I will keep Harlequin very gladly, thanking

you for the loan. Some day I trust you may return to claim and again ride yourself so good a horse.

'V. V.

'P.S.—I will send a groom to fetch him.'

CHAPTER VIII.

A PASSAGE OF ARMS.

THE day after Miss Vyvian herself returned home to Forde Manor, arrived another and much-petted guest. Harlequin, Jack Ramsay's gift, came to the stables like a king, Moorcock was displaced from the best box to make room for him, and in a very short time every groom and stable-boy knew that the slightest matter amiss with his equine majesty was certain to bring a most rare frown on their mistress's white brow.

'He is worth looking after; he won that race so well,' she said, apologetically, to Rufus.

'The man on his back that knew how to ride him did, ye mean,' was the blunt answer.

And that night Violet played her major-domo all his favourite tunes for an hour-and-a-half.

So Harlequin soon made acquaintance with the best hay, oats, and straw that the Forde Manor stables afforded. And every morning his velvet muzzle was kissed by a pair of sweet lips, and a brown, wavy-haired head would be laid on his glossy neck—perhaps a tear or so, once in a way, be dropped there warmly, at which the horse's big dark eyes would turn round as if with quiet surprise.

Mrs. O'Brien almost gnashed her teeth on Harlequin's appearance, which she little expected.

'May I ask what it means, that Captain Ramsay has sent you his horse, Violet?' she asked, turning a little pale.

'It means simply that he is going to India for several years, and as he cannot take the horse, and does not wish to sell him, he has asked me to keep Harlequin meantime.'

'Then you *saw* him in London, evidently?'

Kate's voice was half-stifled with suppressed strong feelings, her face flushed quickly to dark crimson. Not only envy, jealousy, but also guilty fears were struggling in her mind. She felt choking!—Had an explanation come to pass between those two?

'I saw him, yes; by chance. If it is any consolation to you, I may add that he had not even an opportunity to speak to me,' replied Violet, coldly, but directly. 'That is all—— And, now, forgive me, Kate, if I ask you to spare me any cross-questioning on this subject.' With that Violet left the room. The situation was not an easy one between these two women.

'I do not want to be hard on Kate, but O! how freely I should breathe, if only she would go away for some months and leave me my house to myself,' thought the girl. Kate's gloomy smile, that grew ever rarer, more bitter and melancholy, seemed to gall those on whom it rested. It was like a constant reproach, but one that no one felt they deserved, to see her pale, uninterested face, and notice her lagging step that ever grew wearier. In her heart she

was always comparing her lot with that of Violet, quarrelling with fate, as she vaguely termed Providence, for giving the latter such good luck as her fortune, which of course made trouble light to bear for *her*. Kate O'Brien was one of those women bound to be unhappy sooner or later in life, because she had no occupation and not even a single pet pursuit. Violet, on the contrary, stabled half-a-dozen such hobbies; her village school, flowers, prize poultry, embroidery; besides keeping up a varied range of reading and some indifferent sketching and music, that however served to amuse her. All these were possible to any woman of limited means, although horses and hounds were unattainable luxuries. Kate had been a charming pianist before her marriage, and possessed far superior intellectual gifts to Violet; but she had dropped all her accomplishments, and now cared for none of these things.

'Poor soul! poor soul! she is very unhappy, and her own worst enemy. I *must* be patient with her,' mused Violet, perfectly recognising

the state of the case, and pitying as she in vain tried to do good.

Kate O'Brien certainly needed pity. She was eating her own heart out with hopeless thoughts and envy. She had been mewed up in a dull, big country-house, and moped to death, whilst Violet was enjoying herself at balls and parties in town; oh, it was hard!

Then the latter had seen Jack—must have heard from him! The only drop of comfort to the secretly miserable woman was that nothing seemed to have transpired concerning that letter, which she alone knew lay upstairs in her Japanese cabinet.

Violet was so gentle and forbearing after the first little passage of arms concerning Harlequin, that Kate mistakenly supposed the extended olive-branch was a sign of repentant timidity on her friend's part.

'Violet has no spirit,' she said contemptuously to herself. 'She is so painfully meek, it positively tempts me to nag at her.'

Periodically, therefore, Mrs. Kate allowed herself an outbreak of temper. These sallies gener-

ally occurred when, much against Violet's secret wishes, Kate accompanied her to the stables, and watched her petting Harlequin and giving him a carrot. The sight seemed to arouse all the other's spitefulness. She hated to see the good bay horse prick his ears sharply, turning his full, soft eyes round to seek his mistress's caressing hand; hated to hear him whinnying and stamping in regret, when the last flutter of her dress disappeared as the stable-door clicked. Kate would have liked to pet him equally herself, but—her pride rebelled to show such weakness under Violet's clear, honest eyes.

To all little ebullitions of temper, however, in spoken words or inuendoes, Miss Vyvian turned an apparently unheeding ear, trying to keep peace and forgive until seventy times seven. But, presently, the mutterings of the storm her hostess had disregarded grew, unsuspected, to such a blackness of wrath and impatience in Kate's bosom that an outbreak was imminent. It came to action on her part, which changed the aspect of affairs.

One day, when a servant came for orders as

to what horses would be wanted, Miss Vyvian sent word she would neither ride nor drive that afternoon. Violet was not often afflicted with headaches, but she had risen with one that morning, and felt unusually depressed. It might have been because she had lain awake too long the night before, thinking of Jack Ramsay; how he was, and whether he had landed in India yet, and when, if ever, he would come back, and she should see him again. And so, having passed the usual time when she fell asleep, poor Violet seemed to have lost the trick of how to do so, and tossed from side to side till nearly daylight. Whatever the cause, her brain felt as if it was a hollow sphere filled with liquid pain, that ebbed and flowed in little waves at times, and throbbed continually at its most quiet moments. The best of women are apt to feel short in their temper, and desirous to be left alone, when carrying such a headpiece; so Violet was not sorry when Kate, rising presently, said, in an off-hand way,

'Well, it's a pity you can't come out, but I have taken rather a fancy to have a canter

myself. I'll just send word to the stables, so you need not trouble. If you take my advice, you'll not stir from that sofa.'

So saying, Mrs. O'Brien left Violet's morning-room, and, meeting the butler, imperiously told him to send out an order at once that she was going to ride Harlequin.

'Harlequin—m'm?' and the man looked surprised.

'Yes, Harlequin—(Is he deaf I wonder?)' contemptuously added Kate to herself, audibly.

Then she got into her habit with feverish haste, and hurried out, by a covered passage, to the stables.

'There is no use in giving them the trouble of bringing round the horse to the door,' she said to herself, trying to think she wished to spare the grooms. It was true also that Violet's morning-room looked out on the front of the house, but Kate was acquiring a curious habit of veiling her own motives to herself by sophisms, and half believed in her own excellent intention. The head-groom looked annoyed at her appearance.

'The 'oss ain't saddled yet, Mrs. O'Brien,' he said, with a sort of respectful resentment. 'Your own saddle won't fit 'im, so I've been obliged to take it hoff; and all of the other spare ladies'-saddles are too big.'

'Then put on Miss Vyvian's saddle; that will suit me well enough.'

'And I don't consider 'Arlequin is quite well to-day, m'm. If Mr. O'Brien had not gone away for the day, I should have spoken to 'im about the 'oss.'

'Very well, I shall exercise him quite gently. Miss Vyvian meant to do so herself if she had gone out.'

Kate was tapping the ground angrily with her foot. She understood perfectly that the old groom was only raising jealous objections because he disliked seeing anyone but Violet on the favourite's back. Kate was not popular among the servants at Forde. She was too peremptory in manner, being a guest, they considered; and never cared what trouble she gave. How slow and stupid the men were! Kate's expression said so as plainly as words.

There—at last they had finished all the fussing about the good bay horse which she believed they prolonged just to keep her waiting. Harlequin had whinnied a little, then stretched his neck and distended his eyes in surprise on finding that a stranger meant to ride him, and that she had brought no carrot. 'How provoking!' thought Kate to herself, vexed that she, who certainly cared a thousand times more for Jack's horse than Violet, should have forgotten this accustomed luxury. Then she found herself in the saddle, and, with secret triumph at having attained the coveted place on Harlequin's back, drew the reins through her fingers, patted his neck, and was just preparing to ride out of the yard, when——

'Stop!' said a clear, commanding voice.

Violet was standing in the courtyard, very pale, and with a resolute look in her eyes, seldom seen there unless when, in the hunting-field, she was riding at some difficult or dangerous place. She had grown weary of the sofa to which Kate had recommended her, and, putting on a garden-hat, strolled out, meaning to

try the effects of the open air. A mere chance led her to the stables before seeking a favourite shady spot in the gardens, for she wished to tell the old coachman that she had just heard good news of his invalid daughter, whom she had sent to a convalescent hospital. Violet had sauntered languidly enough into the large paved courtyard. But now, in an instant, she was on the alert, fire leaped to her eyes, and the quick blood receded to her heart with a rush, as she beheld Kate seated insolently on Harlequin's back.

'Stop!' she repeated, white with anger, yet trying even in her surprise to control herself. 'How is it you are riding Harlequin—and without my permission? There must be some mistake.'

'Because my own horse has been out too often and needs a rest; and I don't suppose you wish to prevent me completely from riding when I want to go out?' was Kate's defiant answer. She was unpleasantly startled by Violet's appearance, but an angry light had flashed into her eyes also. Possession was nine

points of the law; she was in the saddle, and meant to fight to retain the situation.

'If you had asked me, Kate, before going out, either of my ponies should have been at your service. I am sorry to say so, but I cannot lend Harlequin to you or anyone.'

'And why not, pray? Is it because no one but yourself is good enough to ride your dear friend Captain Ramsay's horse?' jeered Kate, losing her head, and with a look of fury mounting to her handsome features. 'I should think I have as much right to his property as you have, and you ought to know it.'

Violet was shocked at such an altercation taking place under the very eyes and ears of the group of stable-men, who were watching the scene. The sense of how terribly Kate was forgetting all self-respect helped her wonderfully to master her quivering nerves and answer with grave dignity.

'So long as Harlequin is in my stables, I shall look upon him as *my* horse. I am really very sorry to disappoint you, Kate, but I must ask you to dismount. One of the ponies shall

be saddled for you in a few minutes, whichever one you please.' And Violet made a sign to the stud-groom, saying, 'Darley, Mrs. O'Brien will ride either Darby or Joan.'

Darley, who stood suspiciously close to the off-side of Harlequin, made a respectful groom's gesture by raising his hand to where his hat should be, but he kept watching Kate's eye. She had not made the least sign towards getting off Harlequin as yet. But now, as Violet ended, she suddenly gave the horse a smart cut with the whip and started towards the archway gate. In another few moments she would have been through it, but she found Darley running beside her holding on to the saddle.

'Take care, Mrs. O'Brien—the girths are loose. You'll be off in a minute.'

Unseen by Kate in her excitement, he had seized the opportunity a few moments before of unbuckling the strap. Kate felt herself on the point of slipping, and pulled in Harlequin with fury in her heart just as Darley was adding, with hypocritical apology, 'I'm sorry, m'm, but, knowing you was in a hurry for a ride, I

thought it would hasten matters.' He had been loosening the girth even as he ran.

'Take that for your pains!' and Kate brought her whip down with a sharp blow in his face.

The man started back, while his features, grown dark-red under the indignity, showed the mark of the whip right across them.

'Mr. O'Brien would have to answer for it, if he dared to treat me so—not that he would do it; he's a gentleman, he is.'

Kate flung herself to the ground, scornfully disregarding him; and turning to Violet, who had just come up, hissed between her teeth, with a rich colour dyeing her glorious face, though she looked wicked in her beauty at the moment,

'Your servant, there, nearly caused me to break my neck. You see what he did to the girths?' and she pointed to the saddle that had slipped off Harlequin's back. 'I have only punished him as he deserves.'

'My servant, I feel certain, only wished to carry out my orders,' said Violet, with a manner so intensely quiet, and a voice so low but dis-

tinct, it was a striking contrast in its essence of haughtiness to Kate's stormy violence. 'An insult to him I must consider the same as if offered to myself.'

'Look here, Violet, one word for all. I have come out to ride to-day, and do you, who call yourself a friend, choose to disgrace me before your grooms by refusing me the loan of the only horse I would thank you to ride out of those in your stables? Of course I am poor, so you think you can trample on me . . . I cannot afford myself the luxury of as many hacks as I please, so you would delight in making me put on my habit for nothing, and come out here only to be jeered at, and refused the one enjoyment I ask of you—and goodness knows I have few enough pleasures in life!' (The words came out with a torrent's rush from Kate's heaving breast. She hardly paused to take breath as she hurried on.) 'It comes to this, that either I ride Harlequin now, and you give the orders to have that saddle put on again, or else my husband and I leave your house at once. We may not have a roof to shelter us;

but, at least, he will not allow me to be treated in—in—in such a disgraceful manner, however rich you are. You may try to trample on me, but you will never break my spirit . . . Either I ride Harlequin, or else we both go—do you understand?'

'Yes; and though I regret it very much, Kate, I think it will be best for you to leave my house, as you say.'

Kate stared at her friend, stunned. She hardly recognised Violet in the gentle but determined woman who spoke. The feeling that she had this time cut the ground from under her own feet overwhelmed her, and she moved slowly, going straight towards the house. Violet turned to the stud-groom, and said in a kind voice, that mollified the smart of his wound more than any even golden ointment,

'I am extremely sorry for what has happened, Darley, but, as you see, Mrs. O'Brien is excited, and I am certain she will regret her hastiness very greatly before long. You have been so long with me that I hope for my sake you will think no more of this.'

'To please *you*, Miss Vyvian, I'd stand twice that, though I wouldn't endure it once for other living Christian. I can't say more,' uttered Darley.

'Thank you.' Violet turned her very pained face round on the other three grooms who stood eyeing her in respectful admiration. 'And I shall take it as a personal kindness if you will all keep this disagreeable occurrence to yourselves. I should be sorry to have it gossiped over outside Forde stables.'

'We'll take care it won't be, Miss Vyvian,' chorused all the men.

It was not surprising that Violet's headache became so much worse after this scene that she was obliged to retire to her bed before dinner. But Kate also sent down word she was indisposed; so that poor Rufus had a very solitary meal, and blessed his stars later over a soothing pipe among the green tree-ferns of the conservatory that not being a woman—how he pitied them!—he was free from such distressing and mysterious ailments as their headaches. Poor souls! they were never safe; well one minute, and down another.

When Violet came down to breakfast next morning he told her with deep concern that Kate was far from being in good health. In fact, she seemed to have broken down completely, and had told him she required immediate change of air and scene.

'So I must take her over to Ireland as soon as possible, poor girl. It's terribly unlucky, for I hoped to economise a bit, as ye know, my dear Violet, and just meant to run across myself and see if I could either persuade, or fight some little rent out of my tenants. I'd have roughed it alone, but it's different taking her. Well—it can't be helped; but I'll be glad when I get back to the hounds.'

The poor man looked with such a guileless, childlike honesty shining out of his blue eyes at Violet, feeling certain she would enter into his feelings thoroughly, like the good girl he had always found her, that she was touched to forgiveness for his sake; and she indeed knew his difficulties better than did Kate.

'Well, Rufus, you know that the hounds and I can ill spare an old friend like yourself; so it

will not be my fault if you are not back at Forde for the hunting.'

Then, with a pleasant smile, she left the room.

'What does she mean?' thought Rufus puzzled; then he concluded, 'Maybe it means just nothing at all, but I'll ask Kate anyhow; she'll know.'

She did; but reassured the good fellow that it meant nothing.

For the three days that intervened before the O'Briens departed, Kate stayed almost entirely in her own room, and preserved an apparently sullen silence towards her hostess. Yet when she saw that Violet would by no means give up her position of victory, although she had spoken generously to Rufus about being willing to see him and his wife back, Kate's feelings underwent a singular change. The fact was, she really did care for her friend as much as she cared for any woman; and it would be a terrible 'come-down' to have no longer the prospect of a home at Forde Manor.

'Violet, like all such weak people, is obstinate

on some points,' decided Mrs. Kate, privately. 'I must overlook it this time, and when we come back I will set about managing her in a different way, that is all. I made a mistake; but she is an affectionate creature; and will soon forget it.'

Not for a moment did Mrs. O'Brien think of abandoning her secret desire to rule Violet and her household, somehow. Nevertheless, there were genuine tears in her eyes, being emotional by nature, when she came to say good-bye to her young hostess.

'Dear, I'm afraid I lost my temper and said more than I meant the other day,' she said, apologetically. 'You know, once I get angry, I *can't* help myself. But I really am very fond of you; so, as I know it would be dreadfully lonely here for you by yourself, I'll come back to keep you company in October, if you like;' and she kissed her warmly on both cheeks.

Violet, however, stood immovable and silent.

'I really *am* sorry, and, in any case, promise you won't tell Rufus,' persisted Kate, in a really pleading voice, seeing she had not said enough.

Violet remembered, with inward pity, how poor her friends were, how helpless and unhappy Kate would be without the luxuries she craved for and could not afford herself, and, relenting, answered gently,

'I will not tell Rufus; but I think we had better part for awhile.'

'In October, then?' asked Kate, tentatively.

'Yes, in October, if you wish, I shall be ready to have you back.'

'Thank you, dear,' said Kate, humbly.

CHAPTER IX.

NORTHWARD HO!

NOT a soul but Violet and her servants now remained at Forde Manor.

'What a blessed peace!' thought the girl to herself, feeling free to be silent, or wayward, or to indulge in any feminine whims without being hampered by thoughtfulness for her guests' comfort.

She promptly abolished a regular dinner, as it was summer-time, and had a meal that was ready at whatever twilight hour she might please to come in from rambling in the park. Sometimes she stayed at Littleforde and shared the dinner-tea which Mrs. Beaumont had

also substituted for the more correct winter-repast to gratify Miss Dolly. The two friends were together a good deal every day for a fortnight.

Then came the inevitable change.

'Do you know, Violet, I am *afraid* I must take Dolly to the sea next week,' announced Margaret, regretfully. 'She would hardly touch her bread-and-milk last night, did you notice? and she is pale and fretful these two days with the heat. I fear you won't think much of me as a friend, dear, for leaving you alone in this way; and, if it were not that I have solemnly promised to stay with two old maiden-aunts of my husband's at Brighton, I would ask you to come too.'

'Don't think of me,' replied Violet, more cheerfully than she quite felt. 'I recognise it is a case of "needcessity," as my old Scotch nurse used to say.'

Next day, Violet was engaged to lunch with the Blatherwicks, so she drove over to their place in her polo-cart, with two pet terriers on the seat beside herself and her groom behind;

the whole neat turn-out having a you-will-find-it-hard-to-beat-me air!

'Dear Miss Vyvian, *how* delightfully spick-and-span and sportsmanlike you always look!' exclaimed Mrs. Blatherwick, effusively, who had been watching her arrival from the window. 'I always do think you *the* most enviable person——'

'Then you ought not to envy me now, considering there is no more sport to be had hereabouts, and that I have every prospect of remaining by myself at Forde till September or October,' returned Violet, rather glumly, who hated being called a person and also a sportswoman.

'O,—but how dreadful! Fancy *you*, with everything at your command and able to please yourself to the last farthing's-worth. Why don't you travel, now, my dear?'

'Because I hate going alone; but I might hate a hired companion worse.'

'O,—but how dreadful! Billy, do you know that Miss Vyvian is quite alone? And, Mr. Cyril Vyvian, don't you think it is very poor

fun for your cousin staying behind, when we are all hoping to be off to Scotland to enjoy ourselves?'

'I do, indeed, think it will be lonely and not very good for you, Violet,' said Cyril, in a brotherly undertone, he being one of the luncheon-guests also. Then he added, louder, 'But, Mrs. Blatherwick, do not count upon me, yet, please. I must think over this matter of the moor, and let you know.'

Violet inquired their plans, and heard that the Blatherwicks, having been struck with an advertisement in the *Field* of a moor in the north of Scotland, were urging Cyril to join them in taking it.

'If we could get a third, I should not mind doing so,' now vaguely added Vyvian. He was a poor man, and, though very fond of sport, could not often afford to indulge therein when expense was obligatory.

'Why not take me for a third?' put in Violet, with a brightening look. She divined Cyril's inner thought perfectly, knowing his circumstances, and was delighted at the chance

of doing her cousin a kindly turn; at the same time it did seem lonely to be left like a sparrow on a housetop, or a pelican in the wilderness, when all her neighbours were away enjoying themselves. 'I have never been in Scotland, and should like to go immensely.'

Mrs. Blatherwick burst into an ecstasy of rapture. The idea of being joined by Miss Vyvian of Forde Manor lifted her to the seventh heaven; besides, having a most prudent mind, the lady foresaw that Billy, her husband, would gain a heavier share of sport and a lighter bill to his share, as Violet would pay but not shoot. After some mild protests on Cyril's part, who would have preferred asking Violet as his guest, the matter was again conned over, with the result that after lunch Mr. Blatherwick, who knew Glenhoulachan (the moor in question), wrote then and there to take it in their joint names. The rest, meantime, went off gaily to grill themselves at lawn-tennis.

'I say, Billy, I should not be surprised if a match were to come of it between those two,' sapiently confided Mrs. Blatherwick to her

spouse that night over her nightly sip out of Billy's last brandy-and-soda. 'He could not do better, you know; and she might do worse. And then we shall have the honour and glory of making it up.'

'Go to bed, old lady; and don't turn match-maker. It's a game that reminds me of a savage making fire, by rubbing two sticks together. You may burn your fingers at it, but don't expect thanks,' growled Billy. 'Young people like to think they managed all the business for themselves. Not but what propinquity does a great deal; and I will say you see as far ahead as most of your half of creation.'

Two days before the glorious Twelfth of August, accordingly, saw Violet travelling up to the far north of Scotland, in company with Cyril and her maid; the Blatherwicks having preceded them to settle various household matters. Violet's spirits began to rise as they sped onwards. Past the old field of Bannockburn, Stirling Castle, and the green woods of Bridge of Allan. Then, after sleeping at Perth,

through beautiful scenery, where the broad brown Tay mirrors its wooded banks here and there in the stream. Then came Pitlochry, with woods around of mingled dainty, white-stemmed birches and rugged Scotch firs that struck Violet's eyes as a strange northern contrast; and great stretches of lonely moor country followed, dotted with baby-firs little bigger than the heather in which they grew.

Onwards still, past rivers foaming deep down in their rocky beds; and still on, through bare, rolling hills where streams dwindled to burns. Higher yet among purple heather-clad moors, with peeps of cold-gleaming lochs. Then came long blue arms of the sea, running far inland; the rounded Soutars of Cromarty guarding their posts at the mouth of the Firth.

'What a change it all is! And what a pleasure to have fresh scenes to see, instead of the old ones that only set one thinking about oneself!' exclaimed Violet to Cyril, unconsciously betraying why she hailed the change. But Vyvian did not notice the true meaning of his cousin's words. He was not very quick of per-

ception, and was only pleased she was pleased, thinking also how pretty she looked, and how soothing she was as a companion, with something of the effect of the sea on one's nerves. She was full of sympathy, if called on, yet bracing and restful, though with pleasant surface changes. He was very fond of Violet—as he always had been. How different she was to that other woman he had loved with such stormy passion—to Kate O'Brien!

Then came the station at which they alighted, and found a waiting dog-cart. Cyril made himself, for the last time, useful about the luggage, and Violet felt altogether pleased by his really thoughtful care of her during the journey. They drove off together, side by side, seeing great purplish or brown-golden moors rising around, between which wound a narrow salt-water bay, or kyle, running far inland, with a wrathful sunset glittering stormily on its waters. On the shore, shaggy little West Highland cattle glowered at the passers-by, with no air of 'bovine domestic virtues about them,' as Violet remarked, with the first

renewal of her old childish glee noticeable since many a day.

'Quite like Darby and Joan, I declare,' remarked Mrs. Blatherwick, with a naïve air, as, after leaving the loch shore, they drove up for a few hundred yards beside a wooded, narrow ravine, and arrived at the lodge of Glenhoulachan.

It was a pretty enough lodge, consisting of two square cottages joined into one by means of an open verandah. Standing in the latter, one could throw pebbles sheer down into a brawling burn seventy feet below. The water itself was almost hidden by the growth of broom and rowan saplings clothing the precipitous sides of the gorge, that was narrow here, but widened higher up into a picturesque glen. But here and there the eye, looking down through the greenery, espied gleams of snowy white where the water boiled over in little falls; and one could hear the rush and gurgle of the running water all day long, mingling, like a pleasant undertone, with common daily noises. That night, Violet, whose bed-room overhung

the burn, lay in the midnight summer twilight, with her window wide open, listening to the sound of the burn beneath, with its soft swh—ish rising louder now in the stillness. The moon had risen slowly in a clear crescent above some high feathery larches crowning the higher ground across the glen. She thought of Jack Ramsay, as night and morning she always did, and prayed for his welfare. But her brave efforts had so far succeeded that her mind no longer returned to think of him at all hours and in all places. It is terrible to be haunted by one ever-present thought, as Violet had been: approaching, indeed, to a form of madness. Now she was beginning to realize the idea that she was not likely ever to see him again. If, with all his attractions, he was not a man whom she could honour and respect with all her heart, then it were best, indeed, if they never met.

The out-of-door life in the heather-scented air soon helped to brighten and brace Violet up immensely. She looked all the better in two or three days for having left the low southern

pastures of Forde so far behind, as Mrs. Blatherwick told her bluntly, when they were sitting one mid-day on a heathery knoll watching some distant black specks moving towards them over the moors, and occasionally emitting a puff or two of blue smoke.

'There! Did you see that right and left shot, my dear? That was your cousin; he's the best shot of them all. *He* always accounts for his brace of grouse.'

'Not this time. That is one of his sailing away over that rise of ground yonder. But he is a good shot, as he is a good fellow in every way,' said Violet, languidly fanning off a swarm of flies with a long branch of bracken.

'Ah! I expect he would give a good deal to hear you say that; he is so devoted to you, in a quiet sort of way,' cunningly put in Mrs. Blatherwick, unable to resist the temptation.

'In a very quiet sort of way,' was the carelessly-laughing answer. 'Are those sportsmen never coming to lunch? I am not only hungry, but greedy.'

Presently the distant figures of the sports-

men had come nearer and nearer; now they were within hailing distance of the ladies, and made signs towards a burn, while the setters ran up panting, with their tongues lolling out, as much as to say 'Come.' Violet and Mrs. Blatherwick rose and went willingly over the springy ground, through patches of bog-myrtle and cotton-grass spread among the heather. Down at a clear spring-head they joined the sportsmen, who were laying aside their well-used guns, whilst two gillies were unpacking the lunch.

'Hallo, Violet, there you are! Here is a comfortable seat for you,' Cyril called out, in a matter-of-fact voice, pointing to some cushions of green and crimson mosses by the tiny water-course. And, when she accepted his attention, he seemed quite satisfied to stretch himself beside Mrs. Blatherwick, and between the play of his knife and fork to do the civil to that talkative matron. Billy Blatherwick was good-natured but rather bearish to his better-half, and Cyril, in an easy way, liked making things pleasant to women. His manner pleased Violet

more now than any overt show of attachment. She knew Cyril really liked her, and her affectionate nature was always ready to cling to those of her own kin and to return attachment in less or greater measure.

Lunch over, it was pleasant for the grouse-slayers to lie on their backs in the heather, while laziness and smoke-wreaths enveloped them in a gentle atmosphere, and women's talk and laughter rippled softly around.

Then the afternoon's work began again, and most often Violet found herself walking for miles over spongy ground, springy heather, and tussocky grass with Cyril Vyvian. Perhaps not much talk was interchanged, sport being uppermost; still they grew more intimate than ever before, and used to each other's ways. There is so much likeable in most people, that, given mutual sympathy, daily companionship ought to beget at least liking. So it was in this case; a true liking on Violet's part—no more.

Perhaps it was already a little more with Cyril. Even so far back as before the badger-hunt he felt a human, if rather spiteful, wish to

annoy Kate O'Brien by showing a preference for his cousin. Presently the semblance began to grow insensibly into reality. His interest and inclination were prepared to go hand-in-hand, in fact; a decidedly lucky alliance. But he was in no haste; seeing no present rival but Guisard, and, besides, Cyril was a somewhat self-distrustful and retiring man. Remembering Kate, he felt, 'once bitten, twice shy.'

There were some other men staying at Glenhoulachan, for each partner had the right to ask a guest. Violet ceded hers at present to Cyril, hoping later to have up her bosom-friend, Margaret Beaumont. But she was surprised to find Major Ball was one of those invited, Cyril having taken a fancy to him in town, where the two had met several times lately. He was in the highest of spirits, and talked so loudly that Mrs. Blatherwick's heart was quite won. Both she and Ball were of those people who seem to imagine that the rest of the world is deaf, and who delight, like a couple of canaries, in raising their voices higher and higher in friendly concert. No wonder that the head-keeper sourly

remarked: 'The little major's tongue is hung unco light,' and persisted in miscalling him Bell.

Towards evening, when the last shot was fired, it was pleasant turning homewards over the moor. Coming down through the cultivated land of the little 'feus' a covey of young partridges might be seen stealing across the open ground to the sheltering oats like so many chickens. Their *Dies irae, dies illae*, was not come as yet. Then a climb over a stone fence into the woods of 'home,' and a pleasant ramble back through the larches and down the lovely little glen, till the lodge came into view.

Later on a glorious Scotch supper, when the best of hare-soup, smoking hot salmon, mountain mutton, and grouse were spread in lavish profusion, and relished not only for their excellence, but the accompanying hunter's sauce of downright hunger. Afterwards a game of poker; and no wonder that at night Violet slept the dreamless sleep of healthy fatigue she had vainly sought in London and its dissipations.

'And yet a convict's plank-bed is a joke to my couch here,' grumbled Major Ball. 'I believe, on my honour, my mattrass is stuffed with paving-stones.' And he was only appeased by the assurance that everyone else had risen also with aching sides.

Other afternoons some of the party would prefer fishing in the kyle. So they went down through the fields where the wild raspberries in the hedgerows were red with fruit, and the dog-roses a pale pink flush, to a big, flat-bottomed boat that lay hauled up on the gravel. Then, if the tide was running in, the sea-trout came up too, big, and hungry for the fly, and the sea-gull and plover circled overhead. Violet, under Cyril's guidance, learnt to throw a fly, and felt the first wildly exciting w-obble, 'obble, 'obble, at the end of her line, denoting the happy fact that she had struck a trout.

'I like it; but it does not come often enough to please me,' she declared. 'I shall never be much of a fisher-woman.'

Mrs. Blatherwick, however, loved standing up for hours, with her plump person buttoned

tightly into an ulster, flogging the unheeding waters. She seldom had a rise, but she had a thousand reasons to explain why not.

The third day after they arrived was Sunday, and they all walked in the afternoon to see some falls in a picturesque salmon-river two miles distant. Heavy rain had come down during the night, so there was a spate in the stream. It was a wild moorland scene, the rush of peaty-brown water swirling down its rocky river-bed, turning to a clear golden colour as it swept over the falls in the strong shoot of its curve, and downwards in a boiling, seething snowy mass that surged up again in myriad bubbles from the pools beneath. Grilse were springing up the foaming water; plovers circled in flocks, showing white gleams every now and then in their flight over the moors around. The river flowed with a sudden bend, and in the angle thereof was a little lonely graveyard in a wood, that overhung the falls.

'It is a weird, but a beautiful idea,' thought Violet, who had gone a few yards apart by herself. 'The fathers of the hamlets round

should sleep well in this lovely spot, with the soft thunder of the falling water making everlasting music, and the silent moors spread around them in a peace like their own, knowing no tilling or reaping, but nature's blessed rest.'

'Awfully lonely, isn't it, here, Miss Vyvian?' said Major's Ball's voice, and with quite a dismal air he sat down beside the girl on a fallen fir-tree. 'Ugh! it makes me think of deaths and partings, and all that is miserable in life.'

Violet grasped the opportunity for which he little knew that she had been vainly watching since he came.

'You parted from your friend Captain Ramsay, by the way, a few weeks ago. How did he like the prospect of India?' she asked, trying to command her voice to a quite careless sound.

'Poor Jack! Yes, I went to see him off. Never saw him so down in the mouth before, poor old chap; he hadn't a word to throw to a dog.'

'I saw you both one evening at the "Healtheries"; it was quite useless to try to attract your attention,' went on Violet, rather menda-

ciously. 'By the way, who was that very pretty girl Captain Ramsay was with?' Her throat tightened slightly as she waited to hear her successor's name.

'A pretty girl—I can't tell you,' said the little major, with a puzzled look. Then—'O! I know; yes, of course, such a handsome woman! Why, she's his married sister, just come back from China with her husband, who's no end of a three-tailed Bashaw out there, and in a big tea-business or something of that sort. Ramsay is awfully fond of her.'

CHAPTER X.

CYRIL SCORES.

THE other men-guests, with the exception of Major Ball, had all left, and Margaret and Dolly had arrived the previous evening, when one day at breakfast Mr. Blatherwick observed, between the mouthfuls of a huge bowl of oat-meal porridge that he was discussing with great gusto,

'I say, Vyvian, Donald was telling me yesterday we ought to try that beat out by the Smuggler's Cave. You know we haven't been there yet, and I believe it's really the best beat on the whole moor. So suppose you and Ball

start directly after breakfast. I'll wait for Guisard, who I've asked to come over and shoot from Fechan, and then the ladies can all join us at the cave where we will have lunch.'

'Iss Uncle Jack coming?' asked Dolly, in a whisper to Violet.

'No, dear,' she replied, turning away to hide the blush she felt she could not conceal.

'But *I* want him, and so do you, Auntie Vi,' persisted the child.

'Uncle Jack has gone away—a great many miles to another country, and we shall not see him for a long time, Dolly,' put in Margaret, loyally coming to Violet's assistance.

'Ah! Miss Dolly, so you are in love too with my friend Jack,' laughed the little major; 'odd isn't it, Miss Vyvian. how the rascal seems to capture all the hearts of the female sex. Hope you are not a victim too,' he added, with an air of jocularity.

'Of course I am,' replied Violet, with a feeble attempt at a smile. 'You know when such Admirable Crichtons as Captain Ramsay and yourself pay even the common courtesies of civi-

lized life to us poor women—what can we do but fall down and worship you!'

'Well done, Miss Vyvian! You've caught it hot this time, Ball, so you'd better take to flight and get your gun, for it's time you and Vyvian were off,' said Mr. Blatherwick; 'besides, I see Donald walking up and down yonder, no doubt cursing you in forcible Gaelic for being a pair of dilatory Sassenachs.'

'Thank heaven, the little wretch is gone,' muttered Violet to herself, as the funny major left the room, feeling he had got the worst of the encounter, and that Violet held him but in poor estimation.

'My dear,' began Mrs. Blatherwick, 'weren't you rather hard on the little man? I'm sure he means no harm.'

'Then he shouldn't exhibit such a good idea of his own sex,' answered Violet, warmly. 'I declare some men think they have only to look at us to be converted in our minds into a sort of fetish that we are bound by some uncontrollable impulse to fall down and worship;—and evidently Major Ball thinks that his friend and

himself come under this heading. Now I must go and attend to the affairs of state, and answer all these letters,' she continued, smiling, and holding up a budget of correspondence that had arrived by the post.

After some delay the major and Cyril effected a start, though it was always a difficult business to get the little 'man of war' off. One day he would say he would shoot with his sixteen-bore, and then at the last moment he would change his mind and elect to use a twelve-bore. This of course necessitated an adjournment to the gun-room to change the cartridges. Then he would argue for ten minutes on the probable state of the weather, and debate in his own mind as to whether he should take a mackintosh with him or not. Anon he was sure his whisky-flask (which by the way was of prodigious dimensions) had been forgotten, and so on; in fact, as Donald the keeper observed: 'Yon leetle major is enough to drive anybody daft.' At last, however, he was suited with gun, cartridges, waterproof, and whiskey-flask, and a start was made. They had to walk some two miles to their beat,

and arrived there, the dogs, a brace of handsome Gordon setters, were uncoupled, and at a wave of the keeper's hand darted off and began quartering their ground with perfect precision.

The beat was a fairly flat one, lying in a valley between gently undulating hills that some distance beyond fell abruptly towards the sea; their sides seamed with many a deep wooded and rocky fissure, amongst one of which lay the Smugglers' Cave, a noted spot, where in days of yore many a cargo of French brandy and other foreign commodities were landed that never paid the king's duty. These days, however, had long since gone by, and the Smugglers' Cave now saw as its occupants only an occasional party of sportsmen intent on enjoying their lunch amid its cool recesses, that offered a pleasant retreat from the burning rays of an August sun.

'To—ho—steady, Bang!' and Donald holds up his hand warningly. Flash, the other setter, has found birds, and is standing looking as if carved out of marble, so immovable is he. The warning is addressed to the younger dog that,

fired with the emulation and jealousy of youth, is a bit inclined to take Flash's point from him. As Cyril and Major Ball walk up to the point, both dogs creep forward step by step, then halt immovable; then a few more steps, till at last a brood of grouse rises some five and twenty yards off. 'Bang—bang!—Bang—bang!' the four barrels ring out in quick succession. Three birds are down. Two to Cyril—one to the major. As the birds rise both dogs seem to sink into the ground, and remain motionless till Donald bids them, 'Seek dead.' Bang, as the younger dog, and therefore to be encouraged, is allowed to fetch a brace, whilst his older companion has to be content with the honour of bringing only one of the slain.

'Confound it all!' said Major Ball. 'I was sure I was dead on my second bird, Vyvian. Are you sure there is not another down, Donald?' he added, turning to the keeper.

'Ay, *quite* certain, major; ye shot a bit wide on him. I see'd yere shot strike that bit pool yonder, whilst the bird was oot there!' pointing to a spot some five yards to the left.

On they go; now Bang earning the honour of finding birds, whilst anon it falls to Flash. But somehow, though Cyril, who is a really good shot, almost invariably bags his right and left, the little major as often as not only gets one bird, and often *none!* whilst a good many of the hares he fires at go off scot-free, leaving a fleck or two of their fur behind clinging to the heather to show where a stray pellet has struck them. Much time is wasted in following up these animals which the major declares invariably, to be 'hit all to pieces, my dear sir, and *can't* go more than twenty yards.' However, somehow they are never seen again!

And so the game goes on; and, in spite of the 'wee major's' crooked powder, the bag is visibly swelling. It is the fashion now-a-days to vote shooting over dogs slow; but what can be more charming than to see a brace of highly-broken dogs quarter their ground with rhythmical precision, crossing and re-crossing each other, one pointing and the other backing. Besides, there is that great charm of wild moorland shooting over wide stretches of purple

heather, out of which here and there crop out green patches of moss and rushes, likely spots to harbour a duck or a teal, or maybe a snipe.

Then you know not what diversity of game your bag will hold at the end of the day. Perhaps a few brace of partridges if your ground adjoin cultivation; perhaps a hare or a few snipe, or maybe the shooter's prize that bonnie brown, long-billed bird, a wood-cock, a *rara avis* truly on many moors, but not so in the far north.

Cyril and Ball have now shot to the end of the flat, and turn towards the trysting-place, where lunch awaits them. On the way they have to go through a piece of boggy ground, where the white fluffy balls of the cotton-grass are nodding gently in the pleasant breeze that sweeps up from the sea through a gorge in the hills.

'Gang saftly, major, gang saftly, and maybe ye'll get a chance at a deuk,' whispers Donald, as Ball goes splashing through the little pools of water. The warning is issued none too

soon, for with a great fluster up rise a couple of duck almost at his feet.

Bad shot as he is, Ball can hardly miss, and cuts down the mallard before he is well on the wing; but his left barrel produces no effect on the duck, which only accelerates its flight. The little man is all excitement, and regardless of the unwritten laws of sport, and the probability of unsteadying the dogs, rushes forward to secure his prize. As he does so, a green inviting-looking spot lies across his path; one step on this, and the next moment his shout of victory is changed into a most distinct 'D——n!' as he flounders nearly up to his arms in a treacherous moss-bog.

At last, by the aid of Donald and the attendant gillie, the spruce little major of a few hours before was hauled out, dripping like a river-god, and covered with black slimy ooze and particles of green moss. Both Cyril and Donald urged him to go home and change; but, in spite of his ducking and learning that his prize the mallard was safely gathered, the moist sportsman scorned the idea, and, after a lengthy pull

at his whisky-flask, 'just to keep the cold out,' as he observed, with a merry twinkle of his eye, determined to continue the beat. At length they reached the Smugglers' Cave, where they found the ladies busy laying out the lunch; and shortly after they were joined by Mr. Blatherwick and Lord Guisard. The latter, after observing Ball with a supercilious glance, remarked,

'By gad, Ball, should think you've been imagining yourself a terrier, and been going to ground after an aquatic fox, eh?'

'Poor Major Ball, how wet you are! Why don't you go home and change?' kindly observed Violet, noticing the little man's plight.

'It's a mere nothing, Miss Vyvian—tumbled into a bog-hole, that's all; but I've got something for you which I hope you'll put in your hat,' rejoined Ball, at the same time pulling out of his pocket the two curly feathers of the mallard's tail.

'Indeed, that I will,' she rejoined, ever anxious to be good-natured. 'But come, now, to

please me, promise as soon as you have had your lunch you'll go home.'

'As a *preux chevalier*, I must obey a lady's commands,' responded Ball, bowing gallantly.

And now the grouse pie, sandwiches, cake, &c., are attacked with true hunter's appetite, a pleasant ripple of conversation going on the while; and, though Mrs. Blatherwick plays a good knife and fork, she yet, in the intervals of conveying her food to her mouth, finds time to keep up a constant chatter.

'Well, Mr. Vyvian,' she remarked, 'you and the major have beaten Lord Guisard and my husband by ten brace. How fortunate you are!'

'All Vyvian's doing, Mrs. Blatherwick—all Vyvian's doing. I can assure you, Miss Vyvian,' added Major Ball, turning to Violet, '*I* contributed very little to the bag. You see, they brought out my sixteen-bore for me to-day, and birds were a bit wild, and somehow, though I hit a lot—cut 'em all to ribbons, in fact, and the poor brutes *must* die—yet I didn't bag many. But Cyril kept "wiping my eye" time

after time, and if he wasn't such a real good chap, I should feel annoyed—deucedly annoyed,' he added, in an undertone; 'but he is a ripping shot, a real clinker, and it's a treat to see him shoot.'

'By-the-by, Miss Vyvian, I hear you've bought that chap Ramsay's horse, the screw he won the point-to-point race on?' broke in Lord Guisard, with his mouth full of grouse pie.

At this imputation of Jack being a 'chap,' and Harlequin a worthless screw, Violet felt the hot blood mount to her face.

'No, Lord Guisard,' she replied, coldly, 'I have not bought *Captain* Ramsay's horse. He values him far too highly, and rightly so, to *sell* him to anyone.'

'What! he's given him to you, then, eh? Very kind and considerate, I'm sure; but take care the brute don't break your neck,' was the sneering retort.

Violet's feelings were now thoroughly roused. Here was a second insult to one who still, in spite of all, occupied the warmest corner of her heart. Remembering how the speaker had

once sought her hand for no other cause than her money, and with the chivalrous desire to champion the cause of an absent friend, hot words were rising to her lips; but Cyril came to her rescue, saying,

'Come, come, Guisard; you are quite mistaken. Jack Ramsay is a thorough gentleman, and would no more stick anyone with an unsound horse than he would cut off his right hand; and, as to Harlequin being a screw, he managed to show *you* and me the way pretty often and to our discomfort. You forget how he pounded *you* in the "Point to Point." Ramsay is a personal friend of mine, and so I for one won't hear a word against him. If you are bitten with curiosity as to how the horse came into my cousin's hands, I may as well tell you. Ramsay asked her as a personal favour to take care of him during his absence in India, knowing he would have a good home with her. Now are you satisfied?' and he looked defiantly at his lordship.

'I tell you what it is, my lord,' said Ball. 'Jack Ramsay and Harlequin could give you

and the best horse in your stable a stone and a beating any day, over any country you like to name, and if dear old Jack were at home I'd make a match with you for five hundred pounds a-side.'

Women are always grateful to those who come to their aid, and Violet was no exception, for rising, she gave a look at both Cyril and the little major that expressed more than could mere words. She was pleased at Ball's praise of her cousin, and doubly pleased with Cyril not only for the way he had come to her rescue, but for the straightforward manner in which he had defended Jack, *his* absent friend, and (ah! she could not but acknowledge it) the one man on earth she had once loved. All this predisposed her in favour of her cousin, and her warm heart went out towards him. She had always entertained an affection for and taken an interest in Cyril, and now, when she felt so lonely, she had got to lean on her cousin more, and to look to him for assistance. He had on many occasions shown her so much care and attention, had been so sedulous in anticipating

all her little wants and wishes—and then it is so sweet to hear anyone in whom we are interested praised, no matter for what, that it seems to increase any regard we may have for those that give the praise—and so somehow, seeing the good opinion others had of him, Violet now felt herself drawn nearer to Cyril. Her one little romance had been rudely shattered. Was she to waste her whole life for the sake of an idea?—to worship a fallen idol? Was it always to be as now; with no one to look up to, to care for, to go to in trouble or weariness of spirit? Once she had hoped, nay, even been certain, that Jack would have supplied the want. But now——Ah! well, it was no use wasting life in vain regrets. Cyril was a good fellow, and, weak though she vaguely guessed he might be, he still had sterling qualities; and if, as Violet conjectured, he had begun to entertain feelings of love for her,—well, it was something to be offered affection, real, genuine affection, and from one whom she had known from her earliest years as good and kind.

'Now, come, I won't have you all quarrelling,'

broke in Mrs. Blatherwick. 'So now, Major Ball, pray have a glass of curaçoa, and then walk yourself dry. Come, Mr. B.'—turning to her husband—'just be off. You know this is to be our best day, so you mustn't stay dawdling here. Violet and I will go to the top of that hill and mark for you.'

'It's precious little marking you'll do, my love, except mark a prominent point in the landscape with that flaring red petticoat of yours,' answered her spouse, testily. And so, soon the Smugglers' Cave relapsed into its wonted silence, whilst away in the distance little blue puffs of smoke and faint reports betokened that the sportsmen were again at work, shooting their way home with varied success.

CHAPTER XI.

LOST IN THE MIST.

'BILLY,' announced Mrs. Blatherwick one morning at breakfast, 'Sandy, the gillie, tells me there is the sweetest mountain loch ever seen, "full of grand fush," about four miles off in the hills near that big Ben something or other—you know its name. Now, we ladies are all dying to have a long day's fishing in it, so we've settled to do so, and you gentlemen must just come, too. Say yes.'

'If you've settled it, there's not much left for us to say. It strikes me, though, that you are saying two words for yourself and one for the other ladies,' grumbled Billy, good-hum-

ouredly, looking rather like a rosy pig with mutton-chop whiskers, as he raised his head out of his usual preliminary plate of porridge and cream. His criticism was true; for neither Violet nor Margaret Beaumont cared 'wildly well' for angling. But Mrs. Blatherwick did; and she was one of the tight little women who have been said to rule the world. Dolly announced also that she liked to 'fiss,' and, wherever she moved, she had always a court of willing subjects.

So one fine morning they went a-fishing. A cart was borrowed from the nearest farm, and made easy with some sacks full of straw; as the distance was considered too great for some of the ladies' walking powers, and ponies were not to be had. For two miles they jolted, accordingly, up a so-called mountain-road, something like a dry river-bed, till their teeth chattered in their heads, and their cheeks felt shaking like jellies; Dolly giving shrill little screams of glee with every bump the cart made over a rock. After two miles, the track, meant only for peat-carts, ended; so they alighted, and for

the remaining distance breasted the swelling moors and still higher stiff hills bravely. Presently the party separated into twos and threes, for at deceitfully-green, boggy spots each thought they could strike out the best line for springing from tussock to tussock, as also the easiest-looking corries up the hill-sides. Thus Mrs. Beaumont and Violet found themselves alone about one o'clock sitting, panting, on a bare hill-top among out-cropping boulders; while, as far as eye could reach, a wild waste of moorland surrounded them, bounded in the far blue distances by mountain-crags serrated like the teeth of a saw, or strangely-shaped so that one could fancy them great couchant animals.

'How glorious and free it feels up here! I love this unfenced country, where one's thoughts seem to wander unchecked as air, and there are no hedgerows and high-roads to remind us continually of our neighbours,' exclaimed Violet, resting her chin on her hand, and breathing in with delight the brisk mountain breeze that made her blood dance lightly in her veins, as she looked away and away, seeing:—

'Where the moss bears print of the wild-deer's tread,
And the heath like a royal robe is spread.'

'Well, I think these are the longest four miles I ever knew. My feet are soaking wet with slipping about in those bogs, and we have had two showers already. I only hope it does not mean to settle down for a wet day,' declared Mrs. Beaumont, quite pettishly for so sweet-tempered a woman. 'We ought to have come to this famous loch an hour ago, and——Where *are* the others?'

Not a living soul was to be seen on the wastes before them. Violet jumped up in surprise, but it was not until she had run round to the other side of the hill that some human specks were visible, going in quite an opposite direction to that they themselves had lately been taking.

'There they are! Dolly's pony and the gillies. Come along, Margaret, and see—here is the track of a red deer.'

'I should much prefer finding some white heather as a sign of good luck. Here comes another shower,' grumbled Margaret, as a smart

scud stung her face and the sky lowered ominously. 'And is that your romantic loch?'

Violet could not help laughing as her friend gazed in blank disappointment at a dark tarn below them, set in a level expanse of moorland, like a blot of ink in the gloomy waste. No lights or shadows, no tender hues of colouring enlivened the landscape, for the sun had gone suddenly behind a thick grey curtain.

Down hill Violet dragged her friend, half running and protesting, whilst they slipped often in the now thoroughly wet heather, and roused two or three blue hares, startled from their forms.

'Friendship has limits, and I vow I won't trust to you as a guide home, Violet,' gasped the pretty widow. 'You have brought me at least two miles out of the way. Why would you drag me off, and not allow your cousin or Major Ball to come with us?'

'Because—I wanted to have you to myself.'

'All nonsense! Women are well enough together indoors. But you would be much better with your cousin now, and very likely for good and all in life. There! my right boot is

so spongy, it has slipped round, and the sole is almost staring me in the face.' And as the speaker gazed aggrieved at a lately neat chaussure, though rather too light for Highland walking, Violet was spared a reply.

'Here is your lunch waiting. Isn't the loch jolly? Do hurry, for I am longing to begin fishing,' cried Mrs. Blatherwick in welcome, as they arrived at last.

She was attired in an ulster, with the pointed hood drawn over her hat, the shortest of leather-lined petticoats and high-laced, hobnail boots with a 'little side-path,' to quote Edmond About, round them. She was supremely happy, likewise Dolly, who was snugly seated inside Mr. Blatherwick's mackintosh, fastened tent-wise over her head, whence chuckles of satisfaction proceeded as tributary dainties were handed in by her men-subjects.

'Let me hold that umbrella over you, Violet, just to keep the rain out of your claret,' said Cyril, considerately, standing with his back to the storm, and his collar up to his ears.

'Don't mind, please, I like it watered;' and an

inch of rain-fall was received quickly by Violet's tumbler. 'See, your own sherry!—it is toppling over.' She burst into a musical ringing laugh at poor Cyril's woeful face as he turned to see the silver cup of more cordial beverage, that he had propped in the heather, silently pouring out in libation to mother earth.

Then they all put their rods together, and betook themselves to the loch-side, where the gillies had been busily plashing big stones into the dark water to make fishing piers for the 'leddies.' Most of the men waded bravely in up to their knees, excepting Major Ball, who, observing that he did not consider himself a sponge, or any sort of amphibious animal, solemnly flattened down the sides of a very large, grey, cowboy wideawake, under which he had set forth jauntily that morning, and, giving his collar a higher hitch above his damp ears, asked,

'Now, Dolly, what do you think of me?'

'O! you do look a funny little man under that big hat; you're vewy like a mushroom,' replied truthful Dolly, who was thereupon much

puzzled why her mother and Mrs. Blatherwick uttered reproving Hush!'s, whilst Mr. Blatherwick and company laughed uproariously.

Violet, though not by any means kilted so courageously high as Mrs. Blatherwick, was yet so well got-up in a weather-proof, short-skirted Redfern and natty shooting-jacket, that she almost disregarded the still thickening rain, though it poured off her hood presently in sheets as from a gutter-pipe. She stood bravely far out on a big stone, poised so delicately by Sandy that it needed the most nice adjustment of equilibrium not to be soused into the dark flood around. Then, invoking luck, she made a cast far out on the sullen waters, and many times again till she nearly cast away hope.

'How are you all getting on?' she called down the wind between rain-gusts, to the various rock-bound figures, who looked like reeds bending before the storm.

'I'm standing on a perfect logging-stone, I believe,' moaned poor Margaret. 'I feel as if I might be a sacrifice of the Druids, or something like that—Ugh!' as her particular foot-

hold shook ominously, the whole pier threatening collapse.

'The wind is always tying up my line in knots,' came from Mrs. Blatherwick, who held up lamentably a rod that seemed decorated with true-lover's bows. 'Here, Sandy, Sandy, come and undo this thing.'

But red-haired Sandy had dashed into the water near Violet, holding the landing-net in keen excitement. For he had just spied some silver-sided gleams darting wildly in and out of the water at the end of her line, and heard the music of the reel.

'Eh! that's grand! Two fush—that's uncommon,' he exclaimed, as somehow, Violet never knew quite how, she found that having two flies on her line each had hooked its trout. 'Ye wull have been instructed how to fush by Muster Vyvian. It's just a preevileege to watch him.'

So saying, the enthusiastic Sandy looked admiringly to where Cyril stood up to his knees in the loch, while his line swished straight out through the air, and then fell with such treach-

erous lightness on the water that he seemed holding a magician's divining-rod; for truly he charmed those speckled loch trouties out of their element with every cast as if they had obeyed a very Dagon, the fish-god.

The rest were having varied luck, Mrs. Blatherwick alone being persistently unfortunate, while she grew more and more excited, and cast her flies with still more resounding flops on the rain-dimpled waters.

'Ah! I don't take much interest in this sort of rough loch-fishing,' said Major Ball, looking with carelessly fine contempt at his almost empty basket. 'But Spey-casting, now, that I flatter myself I am not a bad hand at.'

As the afternoon wore on, a thick, grey mist softly drew overhead, lessening, as it seemed, the force of the rain which still persistently fell, and hiding all but the nearest objects in the landscape. Both Violet and Mrs. Beaumont had grown weary of fishing after an hour or so.

'For standing in a perilous position, in a wet-blanket atmosphere, cold, damp, with no one to talk to, and when the fish won't rise, is not

my idea of a genial way of spending one's day,' remarked Margaret, ruefully. 'You've got five trout, haven't you? Well, I've caught none.'

'How unhappy you would be if you came out hunting with me, and all the covers were drawn blank! There is one good thing about fishing, it begets patience in an angler.'

'Patience! I call it waste of time. Why, I might have finished a whole petal of that magnolia I was embroidering, if I had stayed at the lodge to-day.'

'Yes; and then when finished you will wrap it up in silver paper and put it by carefully, because, as you acknowledged yesterday, you don't know exactly what to do with it. I am very glad I insisted on your coming up to Scotland. You were getting quite a narrow-minded individual at Littleforde.'

'Well, you will never make a sporting character of me,' laughed Mrs. Beaumont. 'But you are quite right, dear, that a woman living alone does often so narrow her mind within her four walls that she knows no more of the outer world than a bird in a cage.'

They both went to join Dolly, who was seated, presumably like an aboriginal inhabitant of our island during the flint period, in the hollow of a bank, grubbed a few inches deeper to shelter her small person by her special attendant gillie. She was verifying the truth of the adage, that 'a watched pot never boils;' for it was only after three weary times of attempt, hopeful ignition, and damping failure that the gillie had succeeded in making a fire under the lee of the bank, and that he was now boiling a kettle for tea. He had also been doing his best to entertain Miss Dolly, who, failing other amusement, had peremptorily begged for a story. Allister was a melancholy man, and nothing would come to his memory but stories of second-sight.

There was a man he had known in his own (Allister's) boyhood, and this man lived away near Glenhoulachan. One Sunday afternoon, when taking a walk down by the loch, this man was surprised to see the windmill that belonged to his neighbour going round merrily. Shocked at this instance of breaking the Sabbath, the

man went nearer, when lo! the sails were still, and he saw they were fastened; furthermore, he recalled there was *no wind.* He went into the miller's house and told what he had seen, and strange to say within a month the miller died.

Furthermore, this same individual was one day going up the mountain behind his house, when he beheld his own cart coming towards him down the road half-full of peat. There was some one, whose face he could not see, lying as if dead on the peat, and his sister's son was leading the pony.

Now, the man knew he had left his pony at home in the stable; and also the apparition passed by him without any sound. So he went home much perplexed, and confided to his wife what he had seen. Six weeks later, as he himself was cutting turf up on the mountain, he quarrelled, as was supposed, with another man who hit him with a turf-spade and killed him. And his sister's son going up the mountain found the body, and brought it home on the pony-cart, as he had foreseen.

Dolly sat listening open-mouthed, so absorbed in these tales that she struggled valiantly not even to cough when the smoke from the damp sticks and peat occasionally enveloped her. She confided later to her mother that 'Allister was not a funny man, 'xactly, but most intrusting to listen to.'

The tea when brewed by Allister was considerably smoked, but at least it was comforting to be warmed again, as poor Mrs. Beaumont remarked while drying her toes in the embers as she crouched under the bank. And accordingly her face beamed like a sun through the mist.

'What a pleasure it is to see a lady come up smiling like you after a tiring, disagreeable day, Mrs. Beaumont; you are a perfect example to us all,' exclaimed Major Ball, enthusiastically aside to her, transferring his fickle allegiance. And Margaret smiled blandly upon him, yet with an amused twinkle in the depths of her brown eyes. The best of women are sometimes hypocrites.

When at last all the party was gathered, tea

and stronger refreshment exhausted, they started to walk homewards. Cyril, as he felt was natural, attached himself to his cousin Violet, and the rest of the party 'sorted themselves,' (as the clergyman desired the flock of mill-hands he had just promiscuously married). For awhile all followed uphill through the mist, with Allister, leading Dolly's pony, as guide. But then came descents into damp hollows, places where the wet heather grew higher than elsewhere, and private judgment rebelled against the sternly silent dictation of the long-legged leader who stalked ahead on a Roman method regardless of obstacles. Most of the party began surreptitiously to take their own line home; among these the two Vyvian cousins, who preferred a comparatively dry hill-side to sinking in wet moss and struggling through tall heather down in the valley.

They were talking on a subject that interested Violet immensely, namely, some repairs on which Cyril consulted her, and that he thought of making to the old manor-house, where he lived. Now, if there was one thing Violet believed she

had a special capacity for understanding, it was all matters connected with building. Cyril's home was very old, so old it was never weather-tight; in spite of continued repairs, dry-rot invaded its old wainscoting, rats romped behind the walls, and it was the despair of all builders who were called in to prop its sinking floors and worn-out beams. Violet in her heart feared a total collapse of the roof some day, and knew the dwelling involved a constant drain on her cousin's already slender income.

'Don't spend much on it this winter. It really is not worth it, Cyril,' she said, in dissuasion.

'My dear Violet, when a man has no other home, and cannot afford to build himself a new house, he is bound to keep the one he lives in as long over his head as it will stand,' was poor Cyril's obviously sensible reply. And then an idea suddenly struck him (it occurred uncomfortably at the same moment to Violet) that pulled him up short.

There was she, living less than a mile away, with a great handsome house far more roomy

than ever she needed, and they were the only two of the name left surviving. Cyril awkwardly went on, with his mind full of what else he might have said:

'This is the mountain we passed by this morning; don't you remember the look of those rocks. I can't imagine why Allister is keeping down in that bog. It was a much shorter cut, and very little worse walking where we crossed over the shoulder of the hill. Shall we try it now?'

'By all means. Yes; this must be the same place.'

Violet was absent-minded also in her reply. It *was* a pity that Mrs. Grundy forbade her saying cheerfully to Cyril, 'Take one wing of my house and live in it all your life. It won't make any difference to me.' Neither it would; the east wing was always closed, and she liked Cyril as she might a good brother, truly and well.

They attacked the mountain-side accordingly, which was steeper than they had thought.

'But then we must have come down here in the morning, so we never noticed it,' said Violet;

and they kept on bravely, being just able at moments, through the mist, to descry their friends below in the glen. Presently they turned the shoulder of the hill, when it seemed as if a different current of wind drove the mist thicker around them in great rolling clouds like smoke.

'Hullo! We had better hurry down; this is not very pleasant,' said Cyril, anxiously, and he gave his hand to Violet, helping her to scramble down a steep part of the hill-side. Suddenly she stopped and cried out,

'This won't do, Cyril. Look! it is impossible for anything but a goat to get down there. This is not the way we came before.'

'Let us get back again and go down into the glen where we last saw the others,' suggested Vyvian, feeling blameably uncomfortable. His idea was perhaps the wisest course; but, on clambering again up the rocky track, they must have missed a ledge by which they had turned the shoulder of the hill, and now found themselves obliged to struggle higher and higher. The mist rolled too thicker than ever round them, so that it was impossible to see more than a few

feet ahead, and soon both, though trying to hide their thoughts from each other, grew anxious. Cyril stopped continually and hallooed, hoping the others might hear him; but no sound came in answer, though both listened with keenest intentness. An hour passed during which they wandered along the mountain-side, still hoping to find the path somehow. At last they struck a dry bed of a winter-torrent, as both supposed, and courageously began descending it. At every step stones rolled from under their feet, and the descent became so fatiguing that Violet was fain to lean on Cyril's arm, besides propping herself with a stout stick, or else, as she declared, trying to laugh in spite of being tired, she must have found herself sliding down all the way.

Suddenly the laugh died on her lips, even as she last spoke. A large stone, dislodged by Cyril's foot, went bounding down, and the latter only saved himself from falling by a great effort.

'Cyril,' she whispered, with blanched lips. 'Listen!—where did that stone go to?'

At the same moment, a thud far down faintly reached their ears. Violet felt sick, and was obliged to steady herself against a jutting rock where was a little ledge. The awful truth flashed upon them both. This was no dry bed of a brook, the stones were too loose and sharp for that, but it was a 'scree,' or crumbled outcrop of rock, like a small moraine, that one may often see on a mountain-side, forming a natural slide to the valley below.

Presently, in spite of trembling limbs and dizzy heads, they made their way back again upwards; it was dangerous foothold, so that when the stones rolled from beneath them they had to hold their breath and strain every nerve to recover ground. At last they reached a safer ledge, and sank down exhausted and giddy, yet so far saved from the awful death they had so nearly risked a few minutes ago.

'Cyril,' said Violet softly, after a short breathing-time, during which her cousin sat mute and miserable, 'there is no use disguising the truth from ourselves. We are lost in the mist,

and our only chance of safety is to sit still till it rises.'

'I suppose so,' said Cyril, heavily. 'But that may not happen till to-morrow morning. We may have to stay here all night.'

As he spoke, Vyvian took off his overcoat, and in spite of Violet's protestations wrapped it round her. He then tried to strike some fusees, thinking to make a little fire with heather, but the latter was too damp; and at last Violet urged him to desist from the vain attempt, and to console himself at least by smoking.

The mist rolled thick as ever around them. Time passed; and the darkness of evening fell deepening on the lonely mountain-side, where these two figures presently became indistinguishable a few feet away from the rock against which they sat crouched, had other eyes been there trying to descry them.

CHAPTER XII.

'HOW CAN YOU BE SO BRAVE?'

NINE o'clock on a September night, and lost in the mist on the side of a Scotch mountain!

This was the situation in which Cyril and Violet Vyvian found themselves more than three weary hours after they had strayed aside so thoughtlessly from the rest of their fishing-party. It was too dark for Cyril to see his watch, but he struck a fusee from time to time, and even its little glow seemed a comfort. The heavy rain of the afternoon had saturated their clothes, so that they both felt chilled to their bones.

'It would not matter except for the mist that keeps us damp. Otherwise one dries so quick-

ly in this Scotch air,' said Violet, trying to speak light-heartedly, though her teeth felt inclined to chatter in the cold. But the mist was there palpably about them; it clung to their hair, was damp on their cheeks and they inhaled its very breath, heavy and moisture-laden.

At first, both the wanderers had sat a little apart on their rock-ledge. But after an hour or two they crept insensibly closer and kept huddled side by side; partly for mutual shelter and a poor attempt at preserving natural warmth, partly from the sense that they two human beings were lost and solitary in the awful loneliness of nature that surrounded them. They might perish on that mountain-side and their bodies not be found for days and weeks. Such cases were not unknown. They had not even the lee of a rock for shelter; they dared not go further to seek a better refuge.

Luckily Cyril had his flask with him, and when after sunset it grew bitterly cold he made Violet take a little of his whisky. He pressed her to try more, but she refused.

'We shall need it most perhaps in the early morning, the air is so much more chilly then. When my father was ill and I helped to nurse him, we always dreaded most the time before sunrise. But, Cyril—why don't you take some yourself?'

'I can smoke!' and, without caring how soon his little store of cigarettes might be exhausted, Cyril puffed away. It was like the man to be so improvident; also to wish generously to keep the contents of his flask for Violet's sole use.

As the hours passed on, their hopes of being soon relieved languished, and indeed died out of their hearts, while the warmth crept out of their bodies. The others might not miss them till all returned to the lodge (as indeed afterwards proved to be the case); they would not know where to search; and indeed in such a night it would be difficult to find them. On the whole, two wanderers were seldom in a more forlorn plight; while some three miles away they could fancy the gleam of the lodge windows, and the ruddy glow of the peat-fire in the dining-room. They often had a fire there on

cool nights; the men liked to sit around it and enjoy their whisky-toddy. Instead of such warm and pleasant surroundings the gulf of eternity yawned very near before these two. They seemed to be looking into it through the darkness fearfully, as all poor human souls must into the unknown, whatever their faith and courage. A slip, a false step as so nearly happened a short time ago—or the slow creeping cold of the night-air—and their spirits might be loosed from the fleshly trappings and the earth they still found so pleasant, into that unknown other existence.

'It is a pity that you and I, of all people, should be together, if any harm happens to us, Cyril. I should be so satisfied to know you would be my successor; and now I can't think who will come after us both,' Violet said, with a little cheery attempt at a laugh, for under the circumstances she felt she might better do that than cry.

'How can you be so brave? But I admire it in you, Violet; I do indeed. You, who have so much to enjoy, fortune, a happy nature, friends

who love you,' returned poor Cyril, with a melancholy he could not restrain. 'Now I—if fated not to see to-morrow morning's sun—should leave little behind me but debts and trouble, and certainly,' (his voice took a bitter tone, showing where lay the regret in his heart) 'few or none to be sorry. One ought, perhaps, not to wish to be beloved, because at least there will be none left who will grieve, but still, Violet, I trust you may never know how awfully lonely it is.'

'Don't talk like that, Cyril. You know I should be truly sorry, and that I have always liked you very much,' Violet hastened to say in consolation. She had never known before how Cyril felt his isolation; for he had not tasted the joys of home-love since his invalid mother died and left him solitary. 'We have been the best of friends since we were children, have we not? and that is only right, considering we are the last of our race.'

'You. Yes, you are so good and true, Violet, I believe you would be sorry—you alone;' and Cyril pressed the girl's damp-gloved hand

affectionately. 'For my part, if I had anything in the world to leave *you*, I should very gladly do so. But a pauper cannot enjoy the pleasure of leaving, or the far greater one of giving, in his lifetime, anything worth offering to those he cares for.'

'Are you not rating earthly goods too highly, such as the rich man stored in his barns and gloated over the night his soul was required of him?' asked Violet, softly. 'Remember you have given better gifts in your lifetime to your friends—kind words, help, sympathy. These will never be forgotten; and, though unseen, they are of far more real value than the things that are seen.'

There was a silence; for Vyvian was so modest and self-distrustful a man by nature that he could not be led easily to think well of himself, whatever Violet said to cheer him. Then he burst out,

'If I had ever enjoyed any very happy portion of life—as some fellows tell me they did at Eton: and others seem to do later, although theirs may be a short life and a merry one while

the money lasts—I *think* the thought of leaving the world would not give me much regret. But hitherto my life has reminded me of a traveller climbing uphill, hoping to find some happiness at the top, only to see more and more hills rising beyond him, which he must surmount before he can hope to gain his share of earthly joy.' And, stirred strongly for once in his life to seek human fellow-sympathy, a consolation from which circumstances had long shut him out, poor Cyril laid bare his inner history. He told of mortifications endured in boyhood, when his father had not the means, through embarrassments consequent on youthful extravagances, to send his son to a good school, or even give him a proper allowance of pocket-money. Then of struggles later, as a young fellow, to pay that dead father's debts, and his own anxiety to hide the real state of home matters from his enfeebled mother. Lastly, when *she* left him, of his feeling of loneliness—lovelessness. In fact, Vyvian's state of mind was the inner cry of so many of us: 'Surely some measure of joy is the just portion of each

son and daughter of man born on this earth. Give us that, Power that caused us to breathe and suffer! then we can die content.' And he had not had his share; he craved it.

But, now, Violet gently reasoned with him. It was not often that she could overcome the reserve of her nature to speak in a manner which was admitting another into the third and innermost court, the holy of holies of her mind. But to help, and heal, and comfort others there is no earthly consolation to equal such words spoken from the living heart, the eternal soul, of a fellow-being who feels for us. And she felt for him most truly, pitied him, marvelling she had never guessed his inner sufferings until now, having thought of him only as 'poor Cyril!' one rather weak in nature but very kindly, a little given to melancholy, yet most good-natured. How many others, however, had endured far more sunless existences than his, yet lived noble lives; trusting in the perfect compensation and utter happiness of that life to come, which, were it not true, how should the beautiful idea of

justice have ever germinated in the human brain.

An hour or so they talked thus. Violet had meanwhile left her hand for a long time in Cyril's clasp. She knew intuitively it gave him a sensation of being sympathised with, and, conscious that hers was the stronger mind, she pitied him. At last she gently drew it away.

In that long close conversation, they two had come to know each other so intimately that henceforth they could never feel mutually indifferent. They must be friends, at least so Violet felt; for to be shown the workings of another's heart, to understand and feel with and for that other, begets friendship. As to Cyril—a warmer flame of admiration, respect, and affection shot up within him. 'How *good* she is! how true and womanly and lovable!' he thought. The materials for the fire had long been laid; now they were lit.

Meanwhile, the mist had been imperceptibly lifting and clearing from the mountain-side.

'Look, look! I see a star!' exclaimed Violet, with a tone of joy. Soon not one star only but

all the heavenly galaxy of our summer sky shone out in glittering brightness; Cassiopeia was as a sign of gladness to their eyes, and the pole-star brought rejoicing to their hearts, for Cyril hoped to be able to steer homewards by its help.

But not for another half-an-hour did they venture to stir from their position, while darkness enveloped the mountain. Then the moon sailed up, a silver globe of blessed light that illumined at first only stray patches of the rugged mountain-crest towering over the heads of these two wanderers, then spread and spread lower and wider till they could see the wild majesty of the rocky scene around them, and the glen sleeping far beneath, all steeped in that soft radiance, except where some projecting cliff threw its far inky shadow.

Then, aching and cramped but with reviving spirits, they made their way step by step along narrow sheep-tracks, and crept with outspread hands around the base of jutting boulders, till gradually they found themselves getting on safer ground. Unhappily, to reach the glen

below, it was necessary to descend the shadowy side of the mountain, and here their perils recommenced. Nevertheless both were resolved to essay it, when a distant halloo faintly struck their ears.

'They are searching for us. Shout, Cyril, shout! Look there,' cried Violet, laughing a little wildly in her relief. Down in the darkness of the valley two lights like will-o'-the-wisps could be seen moving hither and thither. Cyril shouted with all the force left in him, aided by Violet's more feeble efforts, and there came at once an answering call, while the lights moved up the hillside towards them. In a few minutes more they were surrounded by a group of rejoicing friends, while exclamations of pity and wondering questions were buzzed about.

'We have been searching on the moors for the last two hours and more,' exclaimed Mr. Blatherwick; 'but, at first, when we missed you on nearing the lodge, my wife persuaded me it did not matter, and that you were safe to turn up soon. Not that she was careless, Miss Vyvian—don't think that! but she thought,

ahem! you were both just loitering a little behind, perhaps.'

'It was hardly a day for loitering,' returned Violet, slightly incensed, for she understood at once Mrs. Blatherwick's tender supposition.

On reaching the lodge, however, Violet could not long keep up any anger. Mrs. Blatherwick was certainly vulgar, and often officious, but she was kind to the heart's core and bitterly distressed at the danger of the missing cousins. She was alternately sobbing and piling peat on the fires, preparing warm blankets and hot baths, so Margaret Beaumont afterwards reported, while plying the latter with lamenting queries as to what could have happened?' It appeared that Margaret had ridden home the last four miles, taking Dolly on her lap. But for this, the hue-and-cry would have been sooner started, for when the rest returned without the two Vyvians, Mrs. Beaumont was the first to be alarmed, and remembered having seen them diverge towards the mountain-side.

'But I shall never cease to blame myself for what might have occurred—except that you

look as blooming as ever (and indeed Billy said last night that there was nothing like hot whisky-toddy for pulling people together after such an adventure, and so he made it extra strong, as I told him; only we both settled, as you were put to bed, it would be all the better if it did send you straight to sleep), and so,—what was I saying?' volubly explained Mrs. Blatherwick next morning, being one of those people who tangle the thread of their discourse much as a kitten will a reel of cotton. 'Oh, yes, I remember, it was about my own blame in the business. Of course I never contemplated any danger, so when Billy began wondering why you two did not come up, I just gave him a hint not to bother, as young people don't like to be chaperoned to that extent—especially up on the moors—and Mr. Vyvian I knew, at any rate, would not thank me for spoiling sport.'

'I do not understand what you mean, Mrs. Blatherwick,' said Violet, with considerable vexation and some stiffness. 'My cousin and I have always been good friends, but certainly

nothing more, which is what you seem to hint.'

'My dear Miss Vyvian, *pray* don't be offended. I'm sure, I would not say anything impertinent or interfering for the world. I hate being meddlesome: I do, indeed! (and how Billy would scold me if he thought I had vexed you even unintentionally, for he has the greatest admiration for our M.F.H., as he always calls you). But surely the highest lady in the land may be worshipped and only take it as her right; "a cat may look at a king," you know. And anyone can see that your cousin is attached to you, my dear; why, one could tell it by the look in his eyes when he came downstairs this morning, he was so anxious, no doubt, how you felt! But, dear me, I daresay a great many other men are just as devoted to you and unhappy—only it's no good. *You* can't help it; so it's of no use being squeamish about hurting their feelings. If you don't care for him, you don't; but there, I don't suppose he even expects it.'

Thus Mrs. Blatherwick, with a flattering apologetic air and a parting volley of smiles, and

waves of the hand before she bustled off to the kitchen (which she visited a dozen times a day), tried to assure Violet that her hint 'did not signify.' But somehow the girl felt uncomfortable. It was true enough—although she had never thought of it before—that Cyril did look at her with a new light and a tenderness in his glance; also stray words, and other little suchlike matters, returned to her memory.

In a day or two she could not but own to herself, as she had some time ago suspected, that without doubt Cyril was much more fond of her than any plea of previous cousinly affection would account for. He had fallen thoroughly in love that night on the mountain, and insensibly she had fed his hopes by her assurances that she cared so little for 'the things of this world.'

At first Violet, being grieved, tried to keep out of Cyril's way. Then she saw he did not understand her motives; indeed, he asked her with such disinterested affectionate reproach whether she wanted to withdraw the friendship she had shown him 'that night' on the moun-

tain, that she rightly guessed he meant to ask no more—at present.

After all, Mrs. Blatherwick was right, the girl reasoned. It was not her fault if Cyril cared for her, so why distress herself. And then she pitied him so really, and was firmly resolved she would be his friend thenceforth, take interest in his plans and doings, as he was so lonely and shy (though people did not always know that), be, in fact, a sister, and mentor, and cousin. But this same pity is dangerous to women, and often misleading.

Violet was well aware that at one time, not long after she came into possession at Forde Manor, Cyril seemed disposed to try for the prize which gossip declared must certainly be gained by either himself or Lord Guisard. And in those days, not having seen Jack Ramsay's face, she would most likely have said, yes. Then Cyril's fancy had cooled again to the old cousinly level. Without knowing, or indeed troubling herself much as to his admiration for Kate O'Brien, Violet vaguely suspected the latter might be the deterrent cause. Even

had she known, Violet would have decided it was no business of hers. Cyril, at least—therein lay the sting of the thought—had not been accused, like Jack Ramsay, of making love to two women, two friends under one roof, at the same time. And bitter thoughts rose in Violet's mind.

'Is Kate my evil genius? Must she always interfere with my happiness? Why can she not be content with the attachment of good, kind Rufus, who is so devoted to her?'

And then Violet would remember that, after all, Kate had made herself very miserable, poor, misguided soul!

CHAPTER XIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

One evening, when they had returned from a day on the moors, as usual, and found the solitary post that never arrived till afternoon awaiting them, Violet chanced to see a letter lying addressed to Cyril beside her own correspondence. It was in Lord Guisard's handwriting, for she knew well the sprawling schoolboy hand, having received some correspondence from him in virtue of her office of M.F.H., even had not Cyril in lifting it chanced to show a coronet with a G.

Somehow, Violet could not help fancying that her cousin looked desperately annoyed as he

read this epistle, whatever it might contain. And, without doubt, Cyril was not himself that evening, playing his hand at poker so unusually badly that he was rallied several times.

Next day, it was much the same thing. Vyvian seemed to be thinking about something that prevented him from beginning any subject of talk himself, as he walked home with Violet, whom he mechanically joined, down a wild corrie. The men had been shooting the side of a far mountain, and only towards evening the ladies went out a mile or two to meet them.

'What a magnificent sunset! It is a feast to the eyes,' said his cousin briskly.

Overhead the vault of heaven was like a great bell of sweet blue air, closing softly down on the far moors all round the horizon. Westward a mass of fleecy clouds looked like a flock of rosy sheep huddled together at the gate of the setting sun.

'Yes; very much so,' responded Cyril, absently, staring at the sky with his thoughts evidently on earth, for there was a troubled wrinkle between his eyebrows. This was not indicative

of interest; so, hoping to cheer him, Violet good-humouredly changed her tactics.

'I must tell you, Cyril, that I have been thinking about your house, and have a famous idea. Its present situation is a bad one, so low in the valley, as you agree with me. Now, why not just leave it to stand this winter, or as long as it can, without spending another shilling on it, and meanwhile build yourself a comfortable large wooden one. I have heard they are quite cosy in winter; and, if it did look like one's idea of a squatter's dwelling, no matter so long as it is pleasant and picturesque. And I have been thinking as to wood and carpenters, that both are positively ruining for want of use and employment at Forde——'

(Violet was about going on ingeniously to demonstrate that it would be almost a boon to herself if Cyril would accept the services of two carpenters she kept constantly occupied; besides a gift of the planks, which she calculated would save him most of the expenses of the plan in question. But he interrupted her.)

'My dear, I have just been making up my

mind that the repairs to the old house must stand over for the present. But I fear even a wooden one will be just as much out of my reach at present as a castle in the air.'

'Why, Cyril, you told me the other day you had some money put by for the repairs. You must have been losing it, somehow or other; betting, I suppose. Come, tell me all about it, you naughty boy.'

'Quite true,' acknowledged poor Vyvian, with a face of chagrin. 'It was only something on the Leger, and I thought myself safe to win. Then when "Timothy," which I had backed at one hundred to eight to win me a good stake, only managed to get third, I—well—I lost more than I could afford. I did not expect to be pressed for payment, as my bet—was—ahem! —with a friend.'

'And Lord Guisard has done so?'

Vyvian looked round at her in surprise.

'You are a perfect witch. How do you know?'

'Very simply. I happened to see a letter from him yesterday addressed to you; and

I thought you seemed vexed after it. But, Cyril, he is so well off, surely he is not dunning you already?'

'That is precisely what he is doing. He is, in fact, quite pressed for a few sovereigns in his pocket, or so he seems to say.'

And Cyril laughed harshly, for Guisard's large rent-roll was well-known; as also the fact that if he went out for a day's shooting over his own farms he carefully desired his keeper to pack up and bring home the remains of the lunch and the last half-bottle of claret or beer!

'May I see his letter? Do show it me; I am certain it is a model specimen of its kind,' begged Violet, with a woman's curiosity. As Guisard had done her the honour of a proposal, she wished to see what stuff he would have proved to be made of as a spouse.

Cyril hesitated, but presently rather weakly assented, and drew the letter out of his pocket-book. He could not easily refuse anything, with his yielding nature, to the woman whom he loved.

The epistle in question ran as follows:

'DEAR VYVIAN,

'It has perhaps escaped your memory that you owe me two hundred and forty pounds on the Leger. I should be glad of your cheque without delay as I am deuced hard up. Hope you've been having good sport with the grouse.

'My mother had a couple of brace sent her the other day, which she much enjoyed.

'Yours sincerely, 'GUISARD.'

'Well, that is a precious communication,' exclaimed Violet, indignantly. 'First he says to a friend and neighbour, "Pay me that thou owest," taking him by the throat without having any more patience than the wicked servant in the parable; and then he demeans himself to beg in the same breath for the present of a few birds. If grouse were as plenty as blackberries he should never have one from me.'

Then, when she had vented her feelings freely a little more, her annoyance beginning to amuse Vyvian, in spite of his own, the girl said more earnestly,

'But, Cyril, in a case like this, where you are a little pressed, you surely might allow your friends to help——'

'No, no, no; that is the last thing. I will not listen to you any more,' exclaimed Cyril, laughing nervously; and he fairly turned and left Violet, so as not to be exposed to further persuasion.

Major Ball promptly took the vacated place; and presently Violet roused up from puzzling in her own mind over how she could possibly help her cousin out of his difficulties, to find the little major was holding a sentimental discourse for her benefit.

'Yes, as I say, Miss Vyvian, it makes me feel young again to watch lovers' quarrels. I like it; it's quite refreshing, upon my word. But, still, if I were to offer an old man's advice to any young couple—what are you smiling at? I'm over forty-five, quite in the sere and yellow—I should say: My dear young people, don't amuse yourselves in this way too long; marry, and have done with it. Ah, Miss Vyvian, I'm an example of what I mean; put off marrying my-

self when I might have done it. Long engagements seldom come to any good . . . . misunderstandings, meddlesome friends. So here I am growing old, with no one to care whether I come or go. O, it's lonely! (And of course I can't marry *now*.) So I should be very sorry to see my friends who are younger make the same mistake.' And he looked so significantly in Violet's face, and then glanced with an approving air at Cyril, that the girl coloured a little, realising for the first time how she and her cousin were being regarded. She tried to divert the major's attention from her own concerns, by a return attack.

'But why should you not marry now, Major Ball? and practise what you preach.'

'What, I! Come, now, Miss Vyvian. Why, supposing I got some nice girl of eighteen, or even twenty, to marry me, don't you see she would naturally be wanting to go out to balls and parties, and stay up till all hours. And I'm not a selfish brute; I should like her to amuse herself. But age tells—it does tell. I don't mind stopping up at my club till one or two in a quiet

way, but to racket about until four or five in the morning takes it out of a man of my time of life.'

'But then could you not choose some one a little older?' inquired Violet, mischievously. 'Even eighteen or twenty;' she was herself more than that, so was evidently rapidly aging.

'Why should I?' said the major, rather huffily. 'Of course all boys fall in love with women who are older than themselves, women who know the world and are fashionable, and have lots to say for themselves. I did so myself when I was a young fellow. But my ideas are quite different now. I would only care to marry a girl who was quite young, and fresh, and unsophisticated in all her ideas. Then she wouldn't care to lead a quiet life with an old gentleman like me; so I'll just leave matters alone—Hallo! Hallo!'

And the little man started off running at full speed, trying to head a mountain hare that had been startled, and was scudding towards them, so as to drive it back towards Cyril's gun. He was shouting as lustily as a noisy school-boy,

when he caught his foot in a twisted root, and measured his length in the heather, which untimely ended the race.

'Just like my luck to have handed my gun to Allister to carry,' he complained, limping back to rejoin Violet. 'Now that would have been a lovely shot; just the kind of one that never comes my way.'

His hearer quite agreed with him, for it was remarkable what a capital hand the major was at every kind of sport, except what precisely happened to come in 'his way.' She congratulated the 'old gentleman' on his agility, and thought with an inward laugh that if he ever attained a ripe three-score of years or so, he would most likely be seen ogling the occupant of a perambulator, according to the backward progression of his fancy for the fair sex.

The birds this last week were growing wild, and the weather bad; so a few days later the party at Glenhoulachan was broken up. They migrated south, with a small army of servants, dogs, luggage, gun-cases, fishing rods, etc.

Half Scotland seemed to be journeying in the same manner and direction; and the scenes of confusion at Perth station, and elsewhere, resembled the meeting of angry tribes returning from their yearly expedition to the hunting-grounds.

However, the second evening saw the mistress of Forde and her neighbours quietly installed once more in their respective homes.

Immediately on her return, Violet paid a visit to her old family lawyer, whom she entrusted with the charge of a pressing and delicate little pecuniary transaction.

Two mornings after this Cyril Vyvian was announced very shortly after breakfast. He was looking especially well, his fresh fair face heightened in colour by a rapid walk of nearly a mile across the park, and his eyes shining eagerly.

'Violet, what is the meaning of this?' he asked, walking straight up to his cousin, and taking her by both hands in some excitement.

'I can't tell, indeed,' replied the girl, consciously, and contriving to free her hands. 'It

is not yet ten o'clock, and I must honestly tell you I am in the middle of household matters. I assure you that during my absence ever so much of importance has "all gone to nonsense," as the Scotch say. My canary has been eating her chicklets like any cannibal, and the horses have forgotten how to neigh properly for their sugar, and, as to the hounds, the puppies don't know me, and——'

'Come; that is no answer. Do you not know that a sum of two hundred and fifty pounds has been paid in to my account by some unknown individual at the county bank?'

'Do I not know? Does that mean, do I know? Grammar always puzzled me, Cyril; so I hardly know what you mean. But, at all events, I congratulate you, and am very glad to hear the news.'

'It is no use, Violet. Of course, I am perfectly well aware that no friend except yourself would dream of so helping me. But it's impossible—quite so—though you are an angel. Don't you know, I told you already, I could not allow anyone to help me.'

'Just so!' cried the girl, gaily, 'but no one asks your permission. The deed is done; you cannot help it.'

'You are the dearest girl in the world!' Cyril seized her hand, and kissed it rapturously, but then with shining eyes stammered out: 'Only—don't you see—it can't be done. To accept money from you, a woman, to pay my bets with Guisard. No, no; just imagine! how could I respect myself. Besides, there is the money I put by for house-repairs——' He was still holding Violet's hand, and looked so dangerously moved to tenderness that the latter suddenly froze up a little, and answered, gently freeing herself,

'Well, as you wish. Pay Lord Guisard yourself; but I hope still that you will accept my offering as a loan. I am interested in your having a whole roof over your head, as otherwise you may fall a victim to catarrh, and mourning for you will spoil my hunting. On the most strictly selfish grounds, I shall be desperately, irrevocably offended if you refuse.'

'As a loan, then. I can refuse *you* nothing!'

And Cyril looked indeed so fatuously at the woman he now adored, it seemed as if any resolutions, wishes, or will of his own, excepting always his honour as a gentleman, would melt like snow under a summer sun at a glance of her sweet grey eyes.

Violet nervously caught up her hat.

'Then do me a good turn, and come and give me some advice both about hounds and horses. Now that Rufus is away, there is so much to be seen to.'

Cyril dutifully obeyed, and for the best part of the morning followed Violet from kennels to paddock, from stables to farm, proving himself of material assistance; for in truth Miss Vyvian often secretly felt she had rather much on her own shoulders, but she liked looking into matters occasionally herself, to be certain they were thoroughly well done.

As they returned to the house, Vyvian was just thinking that now he would have an opportunity to say something that was in his mind—something of deep interest—when Violet turned towards him with a smile.

'You have been most useful to me. Thank you very much. But, now, may I treat you frankly as a cousin and say good-bye; for I am *so busy*.'

It was hardly frank treatment, however fair; for she guessed that the poor fellow was on the verge of proposing, and wished to postpone the ordeal and gain time to think over the situation quietly.

Cyril was very obedient. He had no will of his own, apparently, except to please her. As Violet stood on the terrace watching him go, he turned round, smiling back at her with a lover-like expression there was no mistaking. The girl sighed, and stood there downcast, pondering in her own mind.

There came a pattering sound behind her, a gurgling laugh, and a little body threw itself with a rush upon Violet, embracing her with short, fat arms.

'We've come to see you, mother and I. Didn't you *vant* us badly!' exclaimed Dolly Beaumont, in a consolatory tone.

'We have come because Dolly's pity for who-

ever does not always behold herself, or me, is overwhelming,' laughed Dolly's mother. 'But if you are busy, dear, we'll go.'

'Certainly not. Of course one must have an eye to things occasionally; but, when one has good servants, there is no use, as the proverb says, in keeping a dog and barking yourself,' said Violet, honestly; she was only turning to the other side of the question.

Dolly slipped her warm paw into her older friend's hand, gazing after Cyril's retreating figure. Then, looking up in Violet's face, she asked with roguish innocence,

'Do you like *him* as much as Uncle Jack—I don't.'

'You are a silly child, Dolly,' came in Margaret's voice, with gentle reproof. 'As it is impossible you can have Uncle Jack to play with now, you ought to be wise and glad to take Mr. Vyvian instead, who is always so kind to you.'

That night, alone, Violet thought of the child's words, and found herself in tears. But it was a quiet grief, so after a while she began to

think matters out. Everyone seemed to say the same thing, and was bent on pointing out her wisest course, even Major Ball. Being a sensible girl, Violet considered that perhaps the opinion and experience of so many might be right. Certainly she felt her life lonely, and since she could never now have the man she had loved best, perhaps she might learn to be happy in the affection of a gentle kind husband such as Cyril would make.

He seemed designed for her by fate; and then by marrying she could do him such an immense kindness! That was a great temptation.

Yet Violet went to bed undecided, and slept badly.

CHAPTER XIV.

CYRIL GETS HIS ANSWER.

THE next morning, Violet thought carefully over her conversation with Cyril. She felt in her own mind certain that he had yesterday intended to ask her to be his wife, but she was then unprepared to give him an answer. What should she do if he to-day came to the point? She could not disguise from herself that her cousin was really and warmly attached to her, while she—well! she was very fond of him, pitied his lonely existence, that was so like her own—and when once a woman's sympathetic pity for a man is aroused it is often the first step towards a warmer feeling. So it was with Violet, and

after battling hard in her heart with her feelings towards Jack Ramsay she determined that if to-day Cyril did ask her to marry him she would not say nay. Only she must have time. She would try to make him a loyal true wife, but he must not hurry her. In this resolve she was strengthened at breakfast where several disagreeable letters awaited her. Then her stud-groom sent in word he would like to see her, as Harlequin was not at all right. Breakfast over, she strolled out to the stables, where Darley met her with a rather long face, and with a snatch at his forelock said,

'Sorry to say, miss, 'Arlequin is very lame this mornin', and for the life of me I can't make out what it's from. The 'oss came in from hexercise quite sound, and now he is as lame as a tree.'

Violet's face fell at this announcement. She had no one to advise her, not even Rufus. Just then a footman came out and informed his mistress that Mr. Vyvian had called and wished to see her. In her anxiety about the horse, Violet for the moment forgot all that had weighed on her mind, and the probable object

of Cyril's visit. She only remembered how he had helped her with advice on former occasions. Perhaps he might be able to do so now. So she sent back a message asking him to come to her at the stables.

In a few minutes Cyril appeared in the yard, where Harlequin was standing surrounded by a knot of stablemen, all volunteering their opinion as to the seat of lameness.

'O! Cyril,' began Violet, 'I am so glad you have come. Poor Harlequin is dead lame, and we cannot make out where it is. Can you find out?'

After having the horse trotted up and down Cyril took off his coat and himself carefully washed out the foot in which the lameness was apparent; then taking out of his pocket a small magnifying-glass, subjected the frog and sole to a careful scrutiny. At last he said, with a smile of triumph,

'Eureka! here it is; much as I thought. Give me a big knife, you will find in my pocket, Darley.'

Opening the blade he carefully pared away a

piece of the horse's frog, and then taking out a large pair of tweezers gradually drew forth a piece of broken glass which he held up in triumph.

'Now,' he added, turning to the stud-groom, 'put a carrot or turnip poultice on his foot, and in a day or two I think he'll be all right.'

'Well, I never!' exclaimed Darley. 'Who'd ever 'a thought it! I looked at his foot carefully too, but my sight isn't as good as it was, miss,' he added, apologetically.

Really, Cyril, you are a first-rate vet., and as long as you will doctor my horses I shan't employ Mr. Sidebone any longer, and thus save my pocket,' said Violet laughingly.

'You know I'd do anything for *you*, Violet,' returned Cyril, with a meaning glance; which observation, together with the look that accompanied it, was lost, however, on Violet, who at that moment turned to speak to Tom Harkholler, who had just come up.

'Well, Tom, good-morning. Do you want to see me?'

'Well yes, miss,' rejoined the old huntsman.

'I did want to ask you to come and look at old Lavender's puppies. You know she whelped very late, jist afore you came back from Scotland, miss, and they are such a bootiful litter I can't make up my mind which to keep, and I should like you to decide, miss. There's nine on 'em, and it's too many for the old bitch to do justice to.'

'Now, Cyril, you see the troubles of a poor lone woman,' said Violet, laughing. 'You must come to my rescue again. Will you stroll down to the kennels with me and decide the knotty point?'

Of course Cyril would. Would he not do anything she asked him?

And soon the little, round, sprawling puppies were pulled, one after another, out of the straw-covered, hurdled enclosure, with a comfortable barrel at one end, which formed their kennel—and were looked carefully over.

'Well, Tom,' said Cyril, 'I should keep them all bar this one,'—holding up one he had in his arms. 'He's not "straight," and I don't like his feet—they look weak. Old Lavender can man-

age four very well, I should think, and you can easily get a foster-mother for the other four.'

So the vexed question was settled, and, after looking over the rest of the pack, Violet and Cyril walked back together through the park.

It was curious what a change these last few weeks had wrought in Violet's feelings towards her cousin. Formerly she had regarded him as a very good fellow—she was very fond of him in a cousinly sort of way, and so on; but now her heart had insensibly warmed towards him. She had been touched by his many little acts of attention, thought, and care for her. He had, moreover, on several occasions helped her by sound advice, and he, who seemed so incapable of managing his own affairs, had yet benefited her much by his timely aid. Then she was oh! so lonely, and at last owned to herself she would be the better for some man to lean upon—for a man's decisive thought and action—one who would shield her from the constant cares and little everyday worries of life. Yes, she thought she could love him in time, and was, in fact, beginning to do so in a quiet way—not with

the passionate force of that love she had felt for Jack Ramsay, but still in a calm and substantial manner that she felt years might intensify, now that her dream of love had gone for ever!

They were pacing slowly along under an avenue of beech-trees, of which the leaves, turned yellow and brown from the combined effects of a hot sun by day and early frosts at night, were falling down in golden showers as the autumnal breeze stirred the tree-tops, and they bowed and shivered as if they knew that their short life was over, that they too must lapse into decay. To us it always seems that this falling of leaves in autumn is one of the most pathetic sights in nature. In spring they look so bright and cool and fresh; then, when fully expanded in summer, how glorious they are in their masses of verdant foliage! how they rustle and almost seem to speak and whisper to each other when the breezes of June murmur softly through them! Then, when in September they change their hue to lovely shades of brown, red, and yellow (the beginning of the

end, alas!) and commence to wither and curl up, how like our own life when the finger of Time lays his mark on us and turns the once dark locks to silver, stiffens our once active limbs, and deadens all sense of vitality within us. Ah! yes, we all know it, when the time comes that we do not mount a strange horse with the confidence we did once; when driven grouse as they flash past our butt, and rocketting pheasants as they skim over the bare, high tree-tops, are harder to see and more difficult to hit; when we like to linger over our lunch a *leetle* longer and vow it is only so as to enjoy the beauties of the wild, moorland scenery that stretches away at our feet; when we have to put on glasses to read print we once could easily see a yard or more away; when a comfortable arm-chair by the fire has greater attraction than the bank of a Highland river on a wild and stormy day; in fact, when the toil consequent on all sport is no longer a pleasure, and rest and repose have a hitherto unknown charm.

Then, we long for the days of youth again. Yet with age mercifully is given us, let us hope in

most cases, contentment and resignation. Resignation to the Divine will, and contentment to leave to those who will follow us the enjoyment of those faculties, and powers of mind and body, that we once gloried in.

Cyril and Violet had walked on for some time in silence—a silence which Violet felt was beginning to be awkward; so she broke it by saying:

'Really, Cyril, it is very good of you to have taken so much trouble for me, and I am very grateful to you. I don't suppose it would ever have entered dear, stupid, old Darley's head to have imagined that there was a bit of broken glass in Harlequin's foot.'

'You needn't thank me, dear. It was very little to do, and I'd do anything in the world for *you;* and then I was very fond of old Jack, and know how he values the little horse.'

At this allusion to Jack, Violet winced. How fond *everyone* seemed of *him!* Still she had now steeled her heart and made up her mind to forget—or try to forget—all the past, and her

bitter disappointment in the estimate she had formed of Ramsay's character.

'I've got something to ask you,' Cyril went on, after a moment's pause, 'and yet I hardly know how to do it. It's a great deal harder than riding at the stiffest fence I ever went at in my life. *Then* one knew that one would probably get up after a fall, but if I come a cropper over this one I feel I shan't get up in a hurry again, as all my future depends on it. Will you help me over it, Violet?'

'Yes, Cyril, I will if I can,' returned the girl, frankly, bracing herself up, while she knew what was coming.

'Well! it is this,' said Cyril, in a low tone and almost with a touch of tremulousness. 'You have thanked me for having been able at times to be of some slight service to you. Will you give me the right *always* to try to help you? to shield you, as far as I can, from worry and annoyance? to be your companion through life —to be your lover—your husband? Dearest, don't say no—for God's sake! My life is so lonely—so miserable. No one cares for me.

Weak and foolish, I know I am, and full of faults, but oh! Violet, if you will help me I will try to conquer them all for your dear sake, and give you, though you now have it, an honest man's true and loyal love. I know I am not worthy of you—not worthy to black your boots even; but I do love you with all my heart and soul, Violet—and perhaps some day you may get to love me a little bit, and I will try, oh! so hard, to deserve your love. Do, my darling, bring some ray of light into my wretched life. Give me some hope.'

As he pleaded his cause Cyril had warmed into almost eloquence, and his flushed and animated features had assumed an air of resolve and determination that they seldom wore. When he had concluded his passionate appeal, which touched Violet deeply, she replied, with downcast looks,

'I won't be prudish, Cyril, and tell you that I have not expected this, for I have. I will be frank and open with you. I did care for another man, *very*, *very* much; but,' with a tinge of bitterness in her voice, 'I have been disappointed in

him. Like many another woman, alas! I cannot give you the first and freshest love of my heart, but I am very fond of you, and perhaps, if you will give me time, I may come to love you as I ought. If you will be content with this and take me as I am, I will say yes to your question.'

'God bless you for those words, my precious one—God bless you! You have made life now seem bright and happy to me, and may you never repent it. Give me one kiss, will you?' and Cyril's arm stole round the girl's waist.

As Violet slowly and quietly turned him her cheek, he kissed her passionately, and only the sight of Mrs. Beaumont and Dolly in her little carriage, appearing at the end of the avenue, made him desist and return to the deportment of everyday life.

It seemed as if the trifling attentions and little aids Cyril had shown her, had been the cause of her engagement, whereas they really only were the last straws that eventually turned the balance of Violet's mind; and how much we all appreciate little kindnesses, little attentions,

little acts of thoughtfulness from others, when our hearts are sore and torn and we long for the sympathy of another soul.

And so Cyril got his answer, and Violet settled her fate.

CHAPTER XV.

TOO LATE.

Rufus O'Brien and his wife were returning to Forde Manor one early October evening by the express. Their journey from the West of Ireland had been long and wearisome. But even through the dark wastes of the Bog of Allan, Kate had not shown any undue irritation with the niggardliness of Dame Nature. Her good-humour never flagged, on the contrary; and she was looking forward with the liveliest feelings of relief and satisfaction to the coming winter. Her visits in Ireland to her husband's kindly but very needy relatives had been distasteful, and staying at country inns along the Connaught

coast had proved still more disagreeable. What a blessing not to hear everlastingly about boycotting, and non-payment of rents, words that were of ill-savour in her nostrils! she had been in the desert but was going back to the flesh-pots of Egypt.

Kate O'Brien had thought over her own behaviour to Violet during these months of absence, and in spite of much self-excuse and self-pity yet somewhat blamed herself, solemnly.

'I do, and I don't repent!' she concluded.

No, she would not repent as regarded her conduct towards Jack Ramsay. Conscience might say what it pleased, her passionate temper still sprang up and defended that lie; not now boldly, however, as uttered for her own ends, but by ingenious subterfuges contriving to assure herself it had been necessary to Violet's real happiness.

'It would have been madness! I saved her from committing a folly she would have regretted bitterly afterwards,' declared Kate to herself; then more uneasily, 'And, what's done can't be undone.'

She had saved Violet; that was a real kindness in disguise. 'But I gave way to my own feelings too much afterwards. They are too highly strung, and I can *not* control them at times. Well, now I mean to turn over a new leaf henceforth, and try my very best to be good to poor Violet and really sisterly; I will make it all up to her; we shall be perfectly united, and, after all, I really care for her more than almost anyone else, and she could never get on without me.'

Kate's imagination fairly glowed with her virtuous resolves. She foresaw a long life at Forde, when she would help Violet Vyvian to be as perfectly happy as a single woman in so enviable a position could be. Her prospective goodness so impressed her own mind that Kate felt quite saint-like during the journey, and she mildly reproved Rufus for swearing at a porter.

'There is nothing like patience and good-humour, dear,' she remarked.

'Everything in season,' retorted Rufus, testily. 'But it strikes me it's better to look sharp

when some one else is walking off with your luggage.'

They were both glad, indeed, to alight at last, and find the Forde carriage waiting for them.

'What a comfort it is to come *home*,' uttered Kate, unconsciously, sinking back among the cushions with a luxurious sense of well-being. 'I must tell Violet what a stiff neck I got on the Irish cars, from always sitting sideways but wanting to look ahead in a natural way.'

As she spoke, the footman came to the carriage door and delivered a note that Miss Vyvian had sent to meet Mrs. O'Brien. Kate idly wondered what message it could contain, and bent forward to read it by the waning light, as they started. She gave a choked exclamation; then, apparently disbelieving her senses, read it over and over.

'What is the matter, at all?' exclaimed Rufus, in growing alarm. 'Is she ill, or what?'

'She is engaged to be married—to Cyril Vyvian,' answered Kate, in a trembling tone.

'She has only written a few words; that it is best to tell us, but she does not wish it generally known yet.'

Rufus drew in his breath.

'Whew—that is a surprise!' After two or three minutes of silence in the carriage, he uttered again, 'Upon *my* word, that rather knocks one out of time a bit, doesn't it now?' Another little space of mutual silence; then the good fellow gave his knee a hearty slap, exclaiming, 'Come! after all, it is the right thing for both of them, and I'm *very* glad of it . . . I am! If it had not been that I took so much pains with those young hounds in summer, and thought they would be a credit to myself this winter, I'd have been glad of it the first moment. But there is no man I would rather give them, and the horses, up to than Cyril—barring always Jack Ramsay. And that is another thing that rather beats me, for I fancied somehow that Violet liked him. Well, well; no doubt it is all for the best.'

Kate remaining silent, he forebore to urge just then the duty of unselfish rejoicing upon

her, except by his own cheery example. And when they entered the great hall at Forde, with its accustomed welcome of pleasant fire-glow and lights, and Violet herself coming shyly yet warmly to greet them from her invitingly spread tea-table, he gave the girl such a great squeeze of the hand and hearty whisper of genuine gladness at her news, that Kate scornfully thought within herself,

'Is he a hypocrite, I wonder?'

She had merely murmured, presenting her cheek to Violet to be kissed, with a languid manner suggesting weariness of travel.

'So glad you are happy, dear. I wish you all joy.'

Violet showed some haste to quit the topic, although the warmth of O'Brien's good wishes had brought a pleased glow to her face. Soon after forcing herself to drink some tea, Mrs. O'Brien pleaded intense fatigue, and retired to her room for the remainder of the evening, not even appearing at dinner. She wanted to collect her mind; she was fairly appalled at the turn of events.

Next day, however, Kate came down a little pale, but smiling.

'And when is *it* to be, dear?' she asked jocularly of Violet, when they first found themselves alone. 'Of course, like all young people, you are in a desperate hurry to slip your necks into the noose—I mean, tie the happy knot. I suppose the fond lover has already been pressing you to name the nuptial day, "without delay," as the song says.'

'We have not even discussed that yet,' replied Violet, coldly, feeling vexed she could hardly say why. There was a something in Kate's tone that jarred upon her. She suspected the latter was secretly scoffing at her for so soon giving up the memory of Jack Ramsay, and poor Violet was ready to be hurt at that, though believing she had done right. 'You know that I do not wish my engagement announced at present. The marriage will not be for some time, at all events; there is no need for haste.'

('"My" engagement; "the" marriage, not "*ours*." She is shying from the thought of it,')

exulted Kate in secret. She said no more, but her spirits went up with a bound; she felt as if reprieved under a sentence of banishment. Her elation even helped her to meet Cyril with an easy laugh, and look him full in the eyes with more unconcern, she hoped, than he had shown towards herself at their last meeting.

'I must congratulate you on doing the right thing, Mr. Vyvian. You and Violet are the two most sensible people I know; and I trust you will both be as happy as—as *possible*,' she said, in a high clear voice.

Violet, who was standing by, looked up a little puzzled at that word; what did it exactly mean? So did Mrs. Beaumont. They had all assembled for lunch at Forde Manor.

Vyvian, however, who had secretly felt a little uneasy as to how Kate would receive the news, was relieved.

She had masked her really scornful anger at his defection so successfully that he said to himself,

'Thank goodness, she takes it so well; with her temper one could not be certain. But she

is a little vexed, poor thing, I can see. Well, after all, that is only natural.'

And, being human enough, Cyril felt a sense of satisfaction stealing over him at the idea. It had all been very wrong. He thanked heaven devoutly that he was free from that mad passion now, to which he looked back with uneasy wonder. Yet still, it was only a fitting retribution that the fair woman who had so vexed his soul should feel chagrin now that he had escaped from her toils. Cyril fairly trembled to think how close he had been to the brink of social ruin for her sake. She was his evil star in those days, a temptress; it galled him even now (when all was over between them) to remember how Kate O'Brien had lured him on, bewitched, maddened, and then spurned him.

But presently, in the sweet atmosphere that seemed to surround Violet like sunshine, with the soft radiance of her eyes turned now and again upon him, Cyril forgot all unworthy thoughts; and, with a wholesome, honest love entirely possessing his mind, he felt a better,

happier man than ever before in his life. He seemed to himself in Paradise.

'A fool's paradise,' commented Kate, mutely. She was watching his little attentions to Violet with sombre eyes; his looks of shy devotion, his dog-like eagerness to hear, to serve, and to obey, all transferred to the girl; and they had once (though not openly) been hers!

'Wait, my friend, Cyril, and see who laughs last. If a wedding is put off so long without any reason, it may never come off at all. I will trust to chance.'

As the days passed on, however, and Cyril and Violet seemed to remain on the best of terms, though in a cousinly more than loverlike fashion, Kate grew uneasy and paced her room sometimes like a caged savage creature, fretting against what she feared was the inevitable. All her good resolves of patience, real love towards Violet, sisterly devotion, were melted. But she thought of them with regret as impossible now to be put into execution; a fair dream gone.

'I would have been so good, but it is enough to make one wicked!' she exclaimed aloud one day when alone; and was startled to hear her own voice.

Then once more the envious woman set herself to thinking, thinking, how to prevent this hateful marriage. 'It would be easiest done before the engagement is known in the county,' she soliloquised. Yes; but how to do it? At last a sudden idea illumined Kate's brain. 'It is a trump card, and I must play it!' she declared, her features lit up with a strangely-blended expression of reluctance, and determination, and wonder as to the result. 'If this fails, chance may help me; meanwhile, I will try to help chance. There is a last resource—but I hope Cyril will not force me to *that* . . . . meanwhile, Violet can't really care for him, and he only wants her money. She thinks she needs a companion and protector, I suppose; rubbish! As if Rufus and I were not enough, as to that, without sharing her kingdom with a husband.'

At other times there was no more paltering with her conscience in Kate O'Brien's mind;

no more self-deception that she was doing the best for Violet's weal. 'It is the best for myself,' she thought passionately, with quickened breath. Then her heart beat hard as she felt utterly overcome at thought of the privations, disagreeabilities, and even hardships that would be her own portion in life, when she and Rufus lost their footing in Forde Manor.

'Was any poor woman ever so worried and harassed?' she bewailed herself. 'One must look after one's-self in life. Self-interest is the first law in human nature, I have heard. I am sorry! —but all is fair in love or war.'

Short of allowing Violet to marry, Kate was ready to make any sacrifice; would have blacked her friend's shoes, so to speak. But the resolve to stay at Forde, by any means, had utterly possessed her soul, and borne down all other considerations. She knew too well now what life in Ireland with Rufus meant. At moments she regretted wildly having stopped Violet's engagement to Jack Ramsay, for then Cyril would have been master at Forde, *and—and*——

But she still loved Ramsay passionately, and she was growing almost to hate Vyvian.

'Our friend Kate took the news of your engagement to Cyril Vyvian pretty well, apparently?' remarked Mrs. Beaumont one day to Violet, with assumed carelessness.

'Yes. Why should she not?' Violet turned her surprised grey eyes upon her friend. It never dawned upon her understanding that Kate could oppose her marriage out of pure selfishness, or look upon the O'Briens' position at Forde as eternal. The little widow had some shrewd suspicions on that point, but thought it wisest to keep them to herself.

Hunting had now begun again, with the fall of the leaf and the mellow, shortening days of brown October. Violet was glad of it this year, beyond any former season.

'It gives one something to do, Cyril,' she said, with a slight restlessness of manner that was now growing habitual to her.

'To do! As if you are not busy from morning to night. You really don't know how to rest

and be happy, I believe,' was Cyril's admiring yet reproachful answer.

He never could draw Violet into long lovers' talks, of that vague delightful nature when much is said, though little can be afterwards remembered; yet she would discuss sensible topics by the hour with him, consult him on new improvements and all manner of useful plans. Also Vyvian gently but vainly expostulated with his promised bride on the utter disregard of danger she began to show in the hunting-field. Her manner was quiet as ever, but there was well-nigh recklessness in the cool way she took fences, the sight of which latter caused many a man of the Marshwood Vale Hunt to feel his courage ebbing, while he glanced round for a handy gate. Then, too, her eye had never been so keen in the smallest trifle concerning the hounds, her tone of voice, if suggesting reproof, so resolute in its delicate severity.

'Ah, Miss Vyvian, you are showing yourself the M.F.H., and no mistake, this year,' exclaimed

old Squire Bentley, jogging home beside her one day. 'But, my dear child, you ride too rashly, you do, indeed; believe an old man who was your father's friend. By the Lord Harry!' (the old man's pet expletive), 'you took that big double to-day, that even *I* would not dream of.'

In spite of Squire Bentley's pleadingly parental tone of affectionate remonstrance, Violet could hardly forbear laughing outright; for her good old neighbour's courage had not waxed in proportion with his years and stoutness.

A month had now elapsed since the return of the O'Briens. Kate had been biding her time since the conception of her plan of campaign, for too great haste might have aroused suspicion. But she resolved to delay no longer.

'Let us see if the new nail has quite driven out the old one. I will play off Jack Ramsay against his friend,' she bitterly laughed.

The hall at Forde was used as a general sitting-room; its ample dimensions contained all manner of couches and easy-chairs, inviting to drop into when people came home tired from hunting, and were glad to get out of their

splashed pink coats, or habits, and to lounge round the great fireplace. At one end a heavy old-fashioned table with a marble top stood against the wall, and on it the letters which came by the afternoon post were always left. Day by day Mrs. O'Brien would pass through the hall, and glancing round to assure herself that no one was there, or on the stairs, she would softly put her shoulder to this table, trying to push it from the wall. It was a massive piece of furniture, and often she had to desist on hearing a step, her cheeks stained in two scarlet patches from the exertion.

At last Kate perceptibly moved the table a little, barely enough. Next day she tried again, putting out all her strength in a long-sustained effort. It stirred; triumph! There was a crack of space visible between it and the wall. But, as Kate raised herself, a spasm of pain shot through her side so sharply she was obliged to lean upon the table, and put her handkerchief rapidly before her mouth to prevent herself giving a little scream. She had strained herself severely, so she knew, as she

crept upstairs with slow footsteps, catching her breath.

For a few days Kate was unable to hunt, and was obliged to complain of rheumatism. It was a great privation to her to lose her chief amusement, 'but no matter, success is worth it,' she told herself, with a fortitude worthy of a better cause. Violet was most affectionate in her attention and sympathy during her friend's ailment, but she could not prevail against Kate's obstinate refusal to see a doctor.

One evening after this—she remembered it afterwards so well!—Violet came home tired and a little depressed from a long but disappointing day's hunting. A sense as of coming trouble had hung over her like a cloud since morning. She chid herself in vain, tried to fight against the absurd oppression, but it would not be shaken off. Cyril had jogged home beside her, and turned in at the Forde gate on the ostensible plea that he would like to just wait for a cup of tea; which meant a glass of sherry and a precious half-hour longer

to be spent in the society of the girl for whom his love was rapidly becoming an infatuation, which bid fair to rob him of everyday common-sense.

Violet excused herself for a few minutes, and presently came downstairs, having exchanged her habit for a comfortable tea-gown of silver-grey plush that was an old friend when she returned home tired.

'That dress does suit you so wonderfully well. I like to see you in it best of all,' whispered Cyril, feasting his eyes upon his cousin, whose rose-leaf tinted face and sunny hair certainly showed to unusual advantage above the exquisitely fitting bodice, and trailing skirts of which the hue would have tried a paler or less pure complexion. Imperceptibly Violet winced at the compliment, for it so happened that Jack had told her last spring this very dress of hers was his favourite, and she had often worn it merely to please him. She turned towards the dainty tea-equipage, and absently busying her fingers was suddenly vexed to find herself pouring a glass of kümmel instead of cream into her

tea-cup, when there came an exclamation from Kate at the other end of the hall.

'How provoking! I was just going to take up a letter of mine that was lying here, when it slipped down between the back of the table and the wall. What shall I do?'

'It is very strange,' said Violet, coming forward to examine the same marble-topped table, upon which Kate had secretly tried her strength of late. 'I never noticed before that the table was out from the wall. We will ring for the servants.'

Mrs. O'Brien began explaining, with laughing volubility, that she had propped her epistle idly against the wall behind in order to study its address, a silly trick, she owned, when pop! the letter disappeared.

Meantime, the united strength of two powerful footmen moved the great marble weight a few inches, when to the surprise of those watching two letters fell to the ground.

'Hulloa!' ejaculated Rufus. 'Who owns the second one?'

The solemn butler picked up both, and

restoring Kate her property carefully dusted the other letter, which seemed to have lain hidden some time judging from its appearance, and brought it to his mistress on a salver. At the first glance Violet recognised the writing; it was from *Jack Ramsay!* In spite of a sudden heroic effort at self-control, she felt herself flush slightly, then turn pale, and her hand trembled as she examined the post-marks.

In the background Kate, unseen, was standing watching Violet's face with eagerly fixed eyes; she was obliged secretly to support herself upon the back of a chair, and her breath came in frightened pants.

Violet raised her eyes slowly, turning a look of such rebuke upon her butler as that faithful old family servant had never received from her before.

'This letter—from its date—must have been lying where you found it for some months. What have you to say for such carelessness?' Her voice, though low, and slightly broken, was so stinging in its quiet anger that the ponderous, respectable functionary seemed to shrink visibly

smaller in his shoes, and, though conscious of innocence, confounded himself in excuses and apologies. With a wave of her hand, Violet cut these short, and dismissed him with orders to replace the table, and in future to bring all her letters to her own private study.

The fatal letter still lay unopened on her lap. ('Will she not read it? I want to see her face——') thought Kate, with a craving of curiosity that amounted to cruelty. She tried to ask, 'What is your letter, dear? I hope, nothing of importance;' but the words stuck fast upon her lips.

Violet, with a determined calm of manner, went on with her duties as hostess. After an hour or so Cyril reluctantly took his leave; and at last his betrothed was set free. She left the hall straightway, and going to her own study, where her privacy was never invaded, locked the door for further security; then with a beating heart she began to read Jack Ramsay's letter.

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An hour later, Violet had hardly stirred from

the same position. But now her head was bowed; the letter was touched, rather than held between her icy, nerveless fingers; and she dully felt as if her faculties were numbed. Sometimes she thought heavily:—

'What a heartless wretch I must be—I do not feel this pain so much; not so very much. It is quite bearable—I may live to be an old woman with it!' Vaguely surprised at her own supposed apathy, the girl lifted her head once, and saw her haggard reflection in a long mirror opposite; she looked years older.

'Perhaps I do care more than I think,' she said to herself, in a stupid sort of way. Then the words of Jack's noble and manly letter at which her eyes were still staring, that seemed stamping themselves indelibly in her brain, seemed to ring through her head like a cry: 'I have given you *all* my heart. Oh! my darling, my darling, do not crush it and throw it away from you. If you care for lands and wealth more than for me——'

Those were true words; whatever Kate had said, however impossible to reconcile the

versions of these two persons, Violet believed him. Kate could not willingly have spoken untruth, but vanity and passion might have turned her brain.

Then the remembrance of her sacred promise to Cyril, the awful hopelessness of the situation, rushed like a wave over the girl's mind, blotting out happy memories of other looks and words of love. *Too late! too late!* she moaned in anguish. Had this letter but reached her in time, what a difference it would have made in her life through the long years to come!

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ELECTION ROW.

THE hunting-season was fast drawing to a close, and budding primroses betokened the advent of an early spring. The winter had been an unusually open one, enabling the Marshwood Vale Hunt to enjoy a succession of capital runs. Scent had been good, there had been little or no frost, the cubs, having been well rattled in the autumn by old Tom Harkholler, had been taught the way they should go, and in the majority of cases broke covert at the first note of a hound, or at the slightest touch of a horn. So with good weather and straight-necked foxes, the members of the Hunt had good cause to

congratulate themselves on one of the best seasons upon record. Violet had never ridden so hard as she had during this season, so hard and straight on occasions that Cyril had frequently and earnestly remonstrated with her for incurring unnecessary risk, and begged her for his sake to be more careful; but his protests had always been met with a light laugh, and the conversation turned aside. On one occasion she and Cyril were the only two who safely negotiated a very stiff double with a yawning ditch on each side. As they galloped on side-by-side over a large pasture-field, Cyril said to her,

'Oh! darling. I wish you would not ride at such fences. You don't know what I felt when I saw you charge that place.'

'You surely don't want me to show the white feather, Cyril,' the girl replied, with a little upward curl of her lip; then, seeing a look of pain shoot across his features, she continued, brightly, with a touch of mischievousness: 'Besides, you know it is my *duty* to follow you, and Harlequin can go anywhere, can't you, old man?'

she added, bending forward, and patting the horse's neck as he reached at his bridle, with pricked ears and a snort of pride.

There was no gainsaying this latter argument which flattered Cyril's vanity, and so perforce he had to give in, as man generally is obliged to do when he expostulates, or attempts to argue, with lovely but wilful woman. In her own mind, however, Violet could not but admit that she was wrong, and that this hard riding on her part was the result of an inward craving for some form of excitement. This she felt she *must* have *coute que coute*, and once hounds began to run, and she was mounted on that bit of equine perfection, Harlequin, all good resolves to consult Cyril's wishes, that she might have previously formed, seemed to vanish like magic, the *delirium venatico* took entire possession of her, and her only wish was to realize that most delightful of all delightful sensations: being well carried to hounds by a good horse.

As yet, by Violet's special request, her engagement had still been kept a secret from the county at large, nor was the wedding-day

fixed. Cyril had constantly pressed her on this latter point, but hitherto her arguments against naming any date had so far prevailed. She must wait till the season was over; a trousseau could not be got in a few days, and she must have some time in town; these and a hundred other excuses turned the tables in her favour. The truth was, that though Violet, after mature consideration, had determined on eventually marrying her cousin, yet, as the time drew nearer for the fulfilment of her promise, she could not help feeling a certain unwillingness towards taking the final step which would bind her for life in the fetters of matrimony, and make it even a sin for her to indulge in those happy dreams of what might have been, but which now seemed gone for ever.

Kate O'Brien too did her quiet utmost to put in the thin edge of a wedge whenever she could to stop any progress in the matter. Once Cyril, being annoyed and disgusted at this, turned upon her with some heat.

'You back up Violet of course, Mrs. O'Brien, but surely you might think a little of me; and

all this delay is trying to a man.' They two were alone with Rufus in the latter's especial sanctum at the moment, and, Violet being absent, the opportunity seemed a good one to Cyril to put Kate in her proper place. The latter raised her eyes, and looked at him slowly with a demure, meaning smile.

'I do think of you, Mr. Vyvian; indeed, I am consulting your best interests in advising you to take plenty of time to look before you leap. Men are so fickle, you *might* change your mind about Violet, you know!'

Vyvian made a movement of indignant impatience. ('Just like a cat,' he thought, 'spitting at me but afraid to show fight.')

A jolly laugh from Rufus ended the colloquy.

'Don't mind her chaff, Cyril, my boy. Upon my word, I believe Violet is just hesitating, like a dear little soul, because she does not want to give us the turn-out in a hurry; as if we minded —but she is so soft-hearted. That's it, Vyvian, I'm afraid; just too much goodness.'

'We shall *never* get the turn-out if I can help it,' mused Kate secretly, smiling. She knew

Cyril thought she did not mean to fight. Wait! he should see.

All this time Kate O'Brien was watching Violet very closely, with a sharp remorse ever growing upon her. She knew in October last that the girl must have felt deeply the incident of Jack Ramsay's letter; and even guessed that Violet had been shaken to her soul by it. But as the wintry days came and passed, and that neither by word nor deed did Violet show any signs of breaking off her engagement with Cyril, a certain admiration mingled with pity began to grow in Kate's breast.

'She keeps on looking so pale and listless compared with her former self. Is she never going to get brighter again?' she first thought, impatient with the grief she had herself caused. Then after awhile her mood changed. 'Poor Violet, how unhappy she is! and she thinks no one knows it. She does *not* love Cyril; all she feels for him is only liking and respect. She is grieving in secret, but will never break her word. I wonder if these highly honourable people are any happier than others? . . . . . .

Well! I believe it would be a charity to set her free.'

All these thoughts kept working like leaven in Mrs. O'Brien's mind. The upshot was that she became far more unhappy than Violet. She reproached herself even bitterly at times, but thought she *could not* retrace her steps on the downward path. Her deceit had indeed woven a tangled web; but often she would have given almost anything—almost have renounced the luxuries of Forde and her own ease and enjoyment in future—to undo the past, and not see Violet's pallid cheeks and changed smile with its sad expression.

An accident, however, occurred at last which showed Violet the strength of Cyril's affection for her, and stirred her own feelings in grateful response.

A few months previously, a general election had taken place. The politicians who held the reins of government resigned upon a party question, after being in office only a few months, and the country was again called upon to decide between the rival merits of Conser-

vatives and Liberals. The political point on which the approaching battle was to be fought was one of the burning questions of the day, involving the unity of the Empire, and most people who had hitherto given but little thought to politics now suddenly woke up to a sense of their responsibility. Rival orators stumped the country, from end to end, each in turn vowing emphatically that their opponents were the most unmitigated of rascals! Party spirit ran high; those who had hitherto been good friends now exhibited a certain coolness in their demeanour towards each other when they met. Ladies joined political leagues and organizations, working assiduously among the labouring classes with a view to obtaining their votes, and endeavouring to drum into the thick head of Hodge his (now-a-days) political importance. Amongst others, Violet, who was a keen Conservative, had been particularly energetic, and for this cause had drawn down upon her devoted head the denunciation of the Radicals. This odium, Cyril, who was a hardworking member of the Conservative committee, also

shared, for he had taken active part in canvassing and also in speaking at meetings.

In the immediate neighbourhood of Forde Manor, where Violet was universally beloved and respected, the Radical tirades against landowners had taken but little effect. Most of the population had known her from a child, and her father before her, and they knew that in sorrow or trouble the late squire had been their true friend, as ready to help them with words of heartfelt sympathy as with his purse. At last the polling-day arrived, and Cyril before starting went over to Forde to wish Violet good-bye, for he was not to return till the following evening. Violet had been anxious to drive over to the county-town with him, but he had dissuaded her.

'I should like to come, Cyril. I have never seen an election, and it feels as if one were ashamed of one's colours not to put in an appearance,' she had urged.

'I wouldn't have you come for worlds, dear. It is not the place for a lady. There are certain to be a lot of roughs in the town, and I

won't have you run the chance of getting hustled.'

'I hope *you* will keep out of any rows, Mr. Vyvian; it would not do for our bridegroom-elect to get his head broken!' put in Kate, sarcastically.

Cyril flushed up as he replied,

'Thank you for your advice, Mrs. O'Brien. Though there probably will be some "wigs on the green" before night, I hope mine won't be among the number.'

'Why shouldn't Kate and I drive over to-morrow in the pony-tandem to hear the result of the poll?' said Violet, with sudden inspiration.

'Well, there can be no harm in that,' returned Cyril. 'If you will be over at the "Queen's Head" by twelve o'clock, I will meet you.'

'Very well,' replied his cousin, brightening up; 'now be a good boy and take care of yourself.'

'Yes, take care of yourself, Mr. Vyvian,' called out Kate, as Cyril got into his dog-cart. 'We

will bring over some sticking-plaister, however, in case it may be wanted. Accidents will happen, you know!'

The following morning, owing to some delay in starting, Violet, when she reached the town of Stockington, heard the poll had been declared, and the Conservative candidate returned by a large majority, much to the disgust of the Radical party; and when she reached the High Street found that thoroughfare blocked by a dense, shouting, yelling crowd which her ponies had some difficulty in getting through. Her leader becoming fidgetty and frightened at all the noise, the groom jumped down and went to his head in order to keep him quiet and endeavour to make a way for Miss Vyvian through the crowd. The continued tumult, however, upset the pony's nerves completely; he began to dance about, and in doing so one of the Radical roughs was a bit hustled. This was the signal for a general row, and afforded a good excuse for beginning.

'Dang thee, thou —— Tory flunkey, where

be comin' tew? tak' that!' shouted one brawny ruffian, knocking off the groom's hat; 'thick landowning missus o' thine can easy git ye a new 'un,' he added, with a coarse oath.

'Maybe the young 'ooman would like a fresh hegg for her lunch,' shouted another, and thereupon flung a rotten one at Violet, who had just time to put her arm up to avoid being struck in the face by the unsavoury missile.

All this time the ponies were plunging about half mad with terror, and it was all Violet could do to keep them from dashing into the crowd.

'We don't want no 'untin' swells 'ere,' shouted another rough; which remark all his friends applauded with shouts.

Things were beginning to look serious. Kate, her face flushed with anger and annoyance, tried to seize Violet's whip with the intention of lashing their assailants; but this the courageous girl would not allow. She never lost her presence of mind for a moment. A quiet smile played round her mouth, and her face wore an

air of fixed determination as she gazed at the sea of coarse, upturned, angry faces.

'Well, you *are* a plucky set of men to attack a couple of defenceless women like this,' she observed, 'but it is what one might expect. You don't know better. Only if I were a man I would give some of you a lesson that you would not soon forget. As to you, Tom Sloucher,' she added, addressing the man who had begun the row and who was a notorious poacher, '*you*, at all events, ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

The man looked abashed, and slunk away into the crowd, which was now giving way before the vigorous onslaught of a number of the Marshwood Vale farmers, led by young Pile, and Cyril.

The latter had seen Violet approaching and the subsequent *émeute* with alarm, and, knowing how helpless he would be to aid her alone, had quickly collected some of the stout yeomen of the Hunt, who were only too delighted at the prospect of breaking a few

Radical heads and rescuing their beloved young M.F.H.

'Forrard, my lads, give it the rascals!' shouted Cyril, laying about him with a stout stick; and to such good effect did he and his relieving party ply their weapons that they speedily forced a way up to Violet's pony-cart.

'That's the man who began it, sir; it was he who knocked my hat off,' said the bare-headed groom, pointing to a great, hulking blackguard, whose coarse, unshaved, beetle-browed face, surmounted by a cat-skin cap, showed only too plainly that he belonged to the genus 'rough,' an animal much averse to doing any honest labour; more addicted to bullying anyone weaker than himself, and capable of swallowing unlimited quantities of beer in the precincts of low pot-houses.

'You infernal scoundred, what do you mean by attacking a lady in this cowardly manner?' said Cyril, turning on the man.

'Who be yew, yer little cock-sparrer? mind

yer own business, or I'll knock your —— head off,' was the rejoinder.

'Oh! you'll knock my head off, will you? Well, if you've an ounce of pluck in that great, beer-sodden carcase, take your coat off, and I'll give you the chance.'

'Yes, yes, Tom, coom on—give the young swell a jolly good 'iding,' shouted his companions, eager for a bit of sport that they were only called upon to participate in as spectators, and could share without any risk to their own precious selves.

'Cyril, I beseech you, stop,' whispered Violet, bending down.

But Cyril's blood was up, and he took no notice beyond saying,

'I can't, dear; I must give this brute a lesson. Here, Pile, and some of you see Miss Vyvian to the hotel, will you?' And, without more ado, Cyril threw off his coat and hat, handing them to a farmer, one of his own tenants, and, rolling up his shirt-sleeves, stepped into where a ring had been formed by the adherents of both

parties, amidst shouts of 'Hoorah! hoorah! a fight—a fight! Make a ring, boys!'

In the meantime, a passage had been made for Violet, and once outside the throng, where she met old Squire Bentley, she had at his earnest request consented to drive home, after exacting a promise that he would look after Cyril.

'Who'll back Big Tom agin the cock sparrer?' shouted a wag in the crowd.

No one, however, seemed inclined to do this, and in a few moments the antagonists were facing each other in the rudely-formed ring. If size and muscle were to tell, Cyril would, vulgarly speaking, 'be knocked into a cocked hat in a brace of shakes;' his slight, spare, almost effeminate-looking form contrasting strangely with that of his opponent. It did not look a fair match at first glance—Big Tom being some four inches taller and some three stone heavier; but, though he was better 'topped,' his legs looked wooden and knock-kneed, devoid of spring and elasticity. Cyril, on the contrary,

though so slight, seemed all on wires, hard and springy from neck to ankle, and his clear complexion showed he was in good condition. Any judge of character inclined to back either man would have noted the quiet way in which Cyril took off his coat and waistcoat and knotted his handkerchief round his waist; while his face wore an air of cool and quiet determination, very different to the blustering way in which Tom Sloucher prepared for the fray, with many a coarse oath as to how he 'was goin' to sarve the swell.'

After a little preliminary sparring, both men get to work. Cyril keeps his opponent dancing about the ring, drawing him on and feinting, till at last he gets him a bit blown; then, darting in, he gives him a lightning-like right and left full in the face that makes the Sloucher's nose feel like red-hot iron, and the Sloucher's eyes see stars, and is out of range in an instant. Mad with rage, the big bully hits out wildly, but quick as thought Cyril dodges to one side, and, as he pauses and exposes himself, gives

him a blow that sends him staggering on to his knees.

Thus ends the first round. The big rough has not, however, learnt wisdom, and, in spite of his backers' shouts to 'Tak time, mun, tak time!' rushes after Cyril like a mad bull. Once he manages to strike Vyvian fairly in the face, and a large livid spot rises on his fair skin where the full force of the blow has fallen. Cyril, however, preserves his cool head and temper, and still keeps dodging about.

'He's funking—go in, Tom,' shout that worthy's friends, and 'go in' he does accordingly; but this just suits Cyril, who administers a couple of heavy body-blows, and then, as the giant blunders past him, he gives him a right-handed one delivered straight from the shoulder with all his force, which catches Mr. Sloucher behind the ear and makes him fall like a log.

'Dang it all, but that was a good yun,' shouts one of the roughs, keen to recognise merit even on the part of the swell.

'He's killed,' yells another, as Tom Sloucher lies prone and insensible.

'Would any other of you like a turn? If not, take that great blackguard away and clear the way,' says Cyril, with a quiet smile, though he is shaking a little from excitement and his exertions; but the Rads have had enough, and no other champion accepts the challenge, so, getting the dazed Tom on his legs, they slink off.

'Hoorah for the young squire!' shouts young Pile, who has returned in time to see the finish; and forthwith, before he knows where he is, Cyril is mounted on the shoulders of several stout yeomen and borne off to the hotel, where his and Violet's healths are drunk over and over again—oftener, we are afraid, than is good for some of their mutual admirers.

As he drove home, Cyril met his late opponent looking decidedly the worse for the encounter.

The man stopped him, and, touching his cap, said,

'Beg parding, squire, will yer shake 'ands and forgive me?'

'As far as *I* am concerned willingly, Tom; but I won't shake hands with you till you apologise to Miss Vyvian.'

'Dang it all, I'll do that at once; but you mun drive me there, squire; you've knocked me about terrible, and I can hardly see to walk straight.'

'Jump up, then,' was the laconic reply; and in a short time the strange sight was witnessed of Cyril and Tom Sloucher being ushered into Violet's boudoir. The girl looked up in astonishment as they entered.

'Violet,' began Cyril, 'Tom wishes to apologise to you for his behaviour to-day, and has come to express his regret for doing what he did.'

'Yes, miss,' said the now thoroughly subdued-looking rough, 'I be main sorry for what I did —pertikler as I knows how kind yew wos to my missus and children when I got lagged last year; but the fact be, miss, I got drinking wi' a

lot of my mates, and one on 'em says to me, says he, "Tom, do ye want to earn foive shillin'?" "In course I do," says I. "Well," says he, "yew cum along wi' us. Mr. Bustle, the Radical agent, wants a few chaps to kick up a row if the 'lection goes agin 'is party, and will pay us five bob each, so mind yew take the fust chance o' kickin' up a row." So that's how 'twas, you see, miss, and I 'opes, miss, as 'ow you'll forgive me, and I'll promise not never to 'ave any more to do wi' them blackguards. The young squire 'ere 'ave given me a proper good 'iding, and I desarved it, and don't bear no malice.'

After having delivered himself of this long-winded oration, the speaker stopped, looked very sheepish, and twisted his cat-skin cap round and round in his hands.

'Certainly I will forgive you, Tom,' answered Violet, smiling. 'Only keep out of bad company for the future, and, next time you want to have a row, choose a *man* to have it with and not a woman. Now go down to the servants'

hall and get yourself something to eat and drink.'

'And before you go, Tom, I'll keep my promise and shake hands with you,' said Cyril, tendering his hand.

The rough was touched by this kindly treatment, and the tears started to his eyes as he wrung Cyril's hand, and said,

'Dang it all, you Tories *be* the right sort, anyhow; and blame me, squire, if ever yew or Miss Vyvian wants such poor 'elp as I can give, Tom Sloucher's your man;' and with that he shuffled out of the room, glad to escape from a position that to him was decidedly awkward.

As the door closed behind him, Cyril and Violet looked at each other and smiled, and the girl, walking up to her cousin, drew his head down, and kissing him softly on the forehead where Tom Sloucher had left his mark, said, simply,

'Thank you, dear, for defending me as you did—I shall never forget it—but all the same, sir, it is very naughty of your to get into a street-

row, even for my sake, and you are not to do it again *ever*, mind.'

The flush of pride that swept over Cyril's face, and the way his eyes sparkled with pleasure at this little spontaneous act—the first time that Violet had ever kissed him without being asked—showed how much he thought of it, and he felt that he would willingly let Tom Sloucher pound him into a jelly for a week, to gain another such reward.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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